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Art for Book One!

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Added in lateJune 2024

Unfinished oops-

Working on a short animated project...

Information

[image]

I strongly suggest reading this part first! It is slightly different from Warrior Cats, and some parts won't make sense if you don't read at least some of the information below:

This story was first drafted in early June 2022.

(Author's information: "Valley Cats" is a writing project based off of Warrior Cats. It's been a while since I've written anything to be published, so I'm creating a work based off of something before I publish a major original project.)

I have uploaded a few speedpaints on my YouTube channel about ForestClan. Feel free to check it out!

"Valley Cats" is set in southwestern Canada in around the year 2018-ish. I have drawn out a map of everything, and will display it below.

There are nine Clans, each being different from one another, whether it be names or practices. In this story, StarClan is referred to as SpiritClan and the Dark Forest is very different, and is called the Misty Forest. (May change later) Instead of nine lives, leaders receive a gift from SpiritClan. Other than that and some changes between Clans, it works very similarly to Warrior Cats. (Which I do not own, now that I mention it).

[image]

As a little explanation-slash-history, the ancestors of these cats were a small group possibly from the Ancients. Many kittypets or rogues joined them as the Clans were born, so these cats know more twoleg words, like seasons or cardinal directions.

The Nine Clans:

MeadowClan:

A group of cats that live in the open meadow between the two streams that feed into the lake. They are bordered by DeltaClan, CliffClan, and the farm. Their territory is the largest. The cats of MeadowClan are excellent at running through the thick grass. Part of their diet is made up of herbs and berries.

MeadowClan is the only Clan known to grow herbs for general consumption. They are one of teh few Clans who partake in the feline equivalent of sports. Their rules are the most relaxed out of any Clan. A mentor is usually assigned multiple apprentices, and an apprentice is usually assigned multiple mentors.

DeltaClan:

A well-fed community of fishers that live on the delta between the two streams. They mostly eat fish and are bordered by MeadowClan.

They often collect shells and interesting rocks. When they die, these collections are usually buried with them. DeltaClan practices meditation, and they are one of the few Clans to make a version of tea that isn't just for healing purposes. For fun, they play games using items such as pebbles or bones.

In DeltaClan, apprentices choose their warrior names.

MireClan:

Cats who reside in the marsh. They are bordered by ConiferClan, GroveClan, and ForestClan.

These cats live in very shallow water and mud. They usually have short fur and long legs, and are skilled at fishing. They are the only Clan to cut up their prey and sometimes wrap it in leaves, and the second Clan to use tea outside of healing purposes.

In MireClan, they have unique mythology. They believe in various omens, such as the number of eggs in a bird's nest or the way leaves fall.

ConiferClan:

Powerful cats who reside in a small forest of conifer trees. They are bordered by MireClan and GroveClan.

These cats are excellent at digging tunnels underground. They believe they are superior to other Clans. Their rules are the most strict. ConiferClan kits are only named after birds, and they have to be a full year old to become an apprentice. They do not do mentorship, but instead apprentices learn from every cat and at two years of age, they may take assessments. They are the only Clan with a retirement age- once a cat is ten years of age, they must become an elder.

In ConiferClan, they choose their leader and deputy through democracy. They are the only Clan to vote on leadership choices.

GroveClan:

A secretive cluster who live in a small forest of aspen and birch trees, GroveClan has the smallest territory and are bordered by ConiferClan, MireClan, and ForestClan.

Warriors wear a feather behind their ears from their hunting assessment as an apprentice. They usually name their kits after birds or flowers. GroveClan ranks their members in an order of succession. Clan members can challenge each other for positions.

Legends say that GroveClan was formed from a war between ConiferClan, MireClan, and possibly ForestClan over the group of aspen and birch trees. It is said that a few protesters of the conflict settled in the area to defend it from any Clan wanting to claim the unique land. Thus, GroveClan was born.

ForestClan:

Excellent hunters who live in a thick woodland. They are bordered by GroveClan, MireClan, twoleg dens, and WoodClan. Their territory is the third-largest.

Cats of ForestClan usually have short, dusky fur. Their rules change more frequently, as the leaders are given the final say in the laws

the Clan follows. Customs may change from leader to leader, but the cats are usually very flexible and open. They are the only Clan in which the single leader outranks the healers.

WoodClan:

Tree-climbing cats who live in a spacious forest of the tallest trees in the valley. Their territory is the second-largest, and they are bordered by ForestClan and RockClan.

These cats are the only Clan to use a simple system of claw-marks to communicate. They were the first Clan to weave vines, and are one of the few Clans to have a feline version of a wedding and participate in the feline equivalent of sports. They are the only Clan in which the parents name their kits, instead of a healer.

WoodClan is also the only Clan in which a single elder may outrank the leader. They are very superstitious, and believe that certain events bring bad luck (such as entering a den backwards, or dragging something on the ground).

RockClan:

One of the two StoneClans who live on the mountain to the northwest of the lake. They live on the west side of the Moonstream, which creates the Moonpond that feeds into the lake. Their territory is made up of smooth rock and is relatively mild but very cold. Some say RockClan is the closest to SpiritClan, since they have the most access to the Moonpond.

Their kits are often named after bugs or herbs.

CliffClan:

The other of the two StoneClan, and the one on the east side of the Moonstream. Their terrain is much more harsh and rugged, and the cats have a reputation for being aggressive, especially to outsiders. They are bordered by RockClan and MeadowClan.

It is rumored that there used to be another StoneClan who lived on the mountain, which is referred to as IceClan or MistClan. Some of the elders say that CliffClan destroyed them moons ago.

These secretive cats live in caves underground, and are usually named after rocks and crystals. Not much is known about their rules or lifestyle, since their basic information is considered a closely guarded secret, and they are notorious for their hostility to other Clans. However, they mostly keep to themselves and don't cause problems unless provoked. However, they are very distant at times and sometimes don't show up to Gatherings.

It is unknown how big the StoneClan territories are, since the borders may change and the terrain may shift.

Prologue

Cedrspike was, arguably, the slowest warrior in all of ForestClan. Darkcloud was fighting a losing battle in resisting the urge to push him aside and race back to camp. Not in a childish way, but because seriously, how was it physically possible to walk this slow? And even then, why did he insist on leading *every single patrol?*

The dark gray tabby dug his teeth into the vole he was carrying as he craned his neck to peer around the senior warrior. Up the hill, he could see the camp entrance patiently waiting for the hunting patrol. He unsheathed his claws and dug his paws into the autumn leaves as they trekked on.

Cedarspike turned his head around to get a look at the crunching noise, his squirrel dangling limply in his jaws as he hitched his head. Darkcloud retracted his claws and looked down at the ground, slightly embarrased. He may be the deputy, but his Clanmate Cedarspike was many moons older than him. It would be foolish to say anything about his pace.

Suddenly, the older tom stopped in his tracks. He put his squirrel down in front of his and turned to the patrol. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

Behind them, the ever-faithful Cardinalpaw pricked his ears and turned in circles with his head tilted, searching for a noise. Robinpaw glanced over her shoulder, although she could have easily been rolling her eyes. Further back, Sprucefall trotted lightly up the hill to join his brother.

"What kind of noise is it? Or is it just your ears ringing again?" he joked lightly.

Cedarspike shook his head. "It's some kind of howling." he insisted.

Sprucefall tilted his head thoughtfully for a moment, then gave him

a reassuring smile. "It must have been the wind." he dismissed. His brother shrugged and leaned down to pick up his prey.

Darkcloud glanced over at his apprentice, Cardinalpaw. He hitched his head in Cedarspike's direction before sliding past the senior warrior.

Cardinalpaw dutifully followed at his heels, grinning widely at his mentor and nearly crushing the finch in his jaws. He gave Darkcloud a playful nudge. "I'll race you back to camp!" he challenged.

Darkcloud narrowed his eyes at the hollow log a few moose-lengths away. He grunted at the reddish tom before suddenly sprinting away, making it to the entrance in a matter of heartbeats. He circled around to wait for the patrol, but nearly collided with Cardinalpaw.

"Aw, you beat me!" the young cat complained. Darkcloud rolled his eyes. "Have you ever won a race in your life? Against someone who wasn't one of your imaginary friends?" he criticized, nearly dropping his vole in the process. Cardinalpaw laughed obliviously. "It's all about fun, though. Right? Being a warrior isn't about speed."

Suddenly, he straightened up, clenching his finch even tighter between his teeth. "Wait. Does this mean I don't become a warrior?" he worried.

Darkcloud scoffed at his apprentice. "You literally just passed your assessment. Why would I not make you a warrior over something like a race back to the camp?"

Cardinalpaw seemed to relax. "Oh. Yeah. That makes a lot more sense." he said, relieved.

"Out of the way, slowpokes!" Cedarspike called merrily. Darkcloud and his apprentice leaped back to either side of the hollow log to let the patrol pass.

"Look who's talking," Darkcloud muttered, spawning a snicker from

Cardinalpaw.

On the other side of the hollow log, the camp seemed to be wrapped in a rosy glow filtering through the autumn leaves above. The vines growing along the walls admitted many yellowed leaves, although the pink and orange blossoms still fluttered valiantly in the cool breeze.

The two apprentices put their prey in the prey-bush while the older warriors wandered off to the far side of the camp. Darkcloud made a beeline for the prey bush, but hesitated as he leaned down to drop his catch under a branch of shriveled dead leaves.

From outside the elders' den, Stormsong was watching him. The old tom patted the withering grass beside him, beckoning his son. Darkcloud glanced around for an escape before admitting defeat and trotting over.

He placed his vole at his paws and stepped back, turning to leave. But Stormsong completely ignored the prey. "There's my brilliant boy!" he crowed. "How was your patrol?"

At the edge of his vision, Darkcloud could see a few cats observing the enthusiastic elder.

From behind Stormsong, Pigeonwhisker and Pansypool turned their heads before stepping over to greet him, attracted to Stormsong's calls like flies on a honey-covered carcass. Darkcloud felt an internal withering as he forced himself to sit down. "Hello, Stormsong. And friends." he nodded at the two elders.

"Well? How was it?" Stormsong prodded. He was the newest elder, and although he deserved to retire, he still followed daily Clan life as if he were still a warrior.

"It went as expected. Both apprentices passed their warrior assessments." Darkcloud informed him. Beside him, Pigeonwhisker grinned impossibly, showing more empty space than teeth. "That's my boy!" the ancient tom croaked. He was Stormsong's own father, and the oldest cat in the Clan.

Darkcloud offered a slight smile. "Yes." he said simply.

Suddenly, Pansypool straightened up. "Oh, I didn't check on the kits today!" she exclaimed. Even though Ravenflight was now the senior healer, she still felt a responsibility to take care of the Clan. Darkcloud narrowed his eyes at the elderly she-cat, distinctly remembering her visiting the queens twice that morning. "Yes, that's a great idea. I'll go with you." he suggested.

As Darkcloud followed the old she-cat into the nursery, he looked over his shoulder. Stormsong was watching him intently, an endlessly loving expression flooding his face. Darkcloud felt almost guilty, but not quite. He didn't have time to chat with the elders. He needed to focus.

Inside, Dovetail was curled up, fast asleep. Twistedbramble was curled up around her four-moon-old kits. Her mate Ratchaser sat beside her. His grayish-brown pelt faded in perfectly with her pale stripes. Pansypool trotted over to the nursing queen, mumbling cheerily. "How big they are! And only two moons!" she praised.

Twistedbramble narrowed her eyes harshly. "They're four moons old, mother." she spat.

Darkcloud glared at the she-cat. "Yes, she knows. It's only two moons until they're apprenticed." he covered for the elder.

"Catmint, catnip." the queen scoffed.

"At this rate-" Ratchaser said proudly, but was cut off abruptly by Pansypool springing back, letting out a hiss. "Wha- who-!" she barked.

Ratchaser stood up, stepping into the dim light. "Oh, sorry. It's me. Ratchaser." he apologized.

Pansypool blinked her rheumy eyes, then butted her head against her son-in-law. "Ah, yes. My old eyes must be giving up on me." she jerked her head at the three curled-up kits. " What did Ravenflight name them?"

Ratchaser wrapped his tail around Twistedbramble as he lay down

next to her. "That big one with pale stripes is Mousekit. The ginger one is Squirrelkit. And the small, pale ginger one is Marmotkit."

Pansypool nodded, understanding. She had already been told their names every time she checked on the nursery, but every time she gave the same nod of approval. She turned around to face the other side of the nursery where Mothtail was snoring quietly. "Oh, dear. I think Mintleaf is laying on her kits!" she fretted.

Ratchaser rushed over to look. "No, that's Mothtail. Mintleaf's kits are apprentices now." he reminded her.

"Oh. Well I should probably go see what Pigeonwhisker wanted me to look at. He's got another one of those spots on his back." Pansypool remembered. What little light in the nursery died for a moment as she slipped out. Ratchaser turned to Darkcloud, grinning. "She forgot one queen, though." he said good-naturedly.

"Oh, hush, you." a voice spoke from the back wall. Snowspirit's white fur was barely visible from where she was tucked deeply into the moss. Darkcloud stepped over to his mate. "Are you hungry? I caught a vole for you. I can go see if it's still-"

"No, I'm not hungry. You would know that if you didn't patrol all day." she sliced through the darkness. Darkcloud couldn't tell if she was glaring at him or not. "Darling, it's my job," he said impatiently. "I go on patrols."

"The deputy is only supposed to organize patrols, Darkcloud. You need to spend more time devoted to your leader. Or the elders. Or me. That would be a great start." she advised.

Ratchaser stood awkwardly at the exit of the nursery. "Well, I'll... leave you to it." he excused, ducking out through the vines. Darkcloud narrowed his eyes, feeling a tiny flash of jealousy. He and Twistedbramble were so close, even though they both could be a bit prickly- one more than the other. He turned back to his mate, who was definitely giving him an icy blue glare.

Darkcloud lashed his tail in annoyance. "Great, now you've scared him off. I was going to talk to him about expanding the border

into-"

"All right, you lovebirds. Reel it in." an annoyed voice sounded from Twistedbramble's nest.

Darkcloud sat down abruptly, gritting his teeth. "The next time you give me advice, maybe not in front of any... company." he muttered.

"So that's it? I'm embarrassing you by giving you career advice?" Snowspirit retorted.

"No, of course not. I'm just saying-"

Sensing another argument, Snowspirit cut him off. "Not in front of the kits, Darkcloud."

He looked down at the four tiny furballs. They were barely a few days old. Darkcloud didn't want their first memory to be of him bickering with Snowspirit.

"All right. Not in front of the kits." he agreed, leaning over to gaze at them proudly. The four tiny kittens were fast asleep. Or maybe not. He couldn't tell, since their eyes weren't even open yet.

Darkcloud nuzzled the queen. "I can't wait until they open their eyes. They're going to be so happy here." he predicted.

Snowspirit stared back intensely. "I was thinking you should mentor one."

The gray tabby straightened up and puffed out his chest. "One? I should mentor all of them!" he joked. Snowspirit shook her head. "I want you to train *one* of them. But only if you promise me something." she said gravely.

"What is it? I'll do anything. More prey? More-"

Snowpirit cut him off with a flick of her tail. "Promise me you'll be here for every moment of their lives. Your kits need you, Darkcloud. You can't stay out all day hunting and patrolling. You need to be a father." she said. "Promise me you'll be there for them."

Darkcloud settled down, blinking softly at the tiny kits. "I promise. I'll be in every second of their lives. I'm not going anywhere."

"Aw, how sweet!" someone crowed from the darkness.

"Shut it, Twistedbramble," both cats snapped.

Excessively Long Allegiances- Act One

Note: These allegiances are very long! The Clans are normal-sized but there are nine of them, plus a few named characters outside of them. A few descriptions may be longer, since the personalities may or may not be described. *You don't have to read any of this. I know I wouldn't!*

(A little list of new suffixes I made: Sweep, Sting, Snag, Spice, Burn, Trail, Crawl, Ridge, Stretch, Hitch, Rush, Rise, Stride, Horn, Snap, Twist, Myrtle, Smolder, Thicket, Swirl, Scale, Flip, Trickle, Crest, Fade, Whistle, Glide, Beak, Mist, Stone, Chaser, Lash, Shake)

ForestClan:

Leader: Poppystar- An orange tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. She is mild and agreeable, but often passive.

Deputy: Sandyfur- Cream-and-light-brown she-cat with fiery amber eyes. She deeply cares about her Clan and loved ones, but can be a bit prickly at times.

(Apprentice: Daisypaw)

Healers:

Shadowsweep- Black-and-white she-cat with pale blue eyes. She is tall, and has a long tail. She is enthusiastic and eccentric, but very responsible and efficient.

Ravenflight- A tall and slender, dark gray tom with white paws and muzzle. He has bright orange eyes and a calm and even personality.

(Apprentice: Sagepaw)

Warriors:

Sprucefall- A light brown tom with deep golden eyes.

(Apprentice: Mousepaw)

Cedarspike- Light-brown-and-white tom with orange eyes.

Pinebristle- Reddish-brown striped tom with amber eyes. He is affectionate with a sharp side.

Crowpelt- A tall and slender dark gray tom with a white-tipped tail and muzzle streak. He has darker ears and tail with pale blue eyes. He has a cold and quiet air about him.

Cardinalheart- Reddish-brown tom with golden eyes. He is cheerful and open, and he always wants to do the right thing.

Robinsong- A reddish-orange she-cat with yellow eyes. She is very irritable and bitter.

(Apprentice: Squirrelpaw)

Basilfang- A pale tabby tom with golden eyes. He is laid-back, but often seems sluggish.

(Apprentice: Lilypaw)

Parsleyshade- Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes. She is forgetful

and awkward, but endlessly friendly.

Apprentices:

Sagepaw: Cream-colored tom with darker paws and tail with pale green eyes.

Squirrelpaw- Dusky ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Mousepaw- Pale tabby tom with fiery amber eyes.

Daisypaw- Cream-colored she-cat with darker flecks and amber eyes.

Lilypaw- A white she-cat with light yellow eyes. She is deaf in one ear and is very loyal and supportive.

Queens:

Mothtail- White-and-pale-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. She is sarcastic and prickly, but is very observant and imaginative.

Dovetail- Cream-colored she-cat with darker patches and orange eyes. She is very gentle and kind.

Snowspirit- A white she-cat with blue eyes. She is overprotective and impulsive, but cares deeply about her loved ones.

Kits:

Mothtail and Pinebristle: *(Amberkit, a pale brown tabby she-kit, Mosskit, a pale tabby she-kit, Thornkit, a pale tabby-and-white tom)*

Dovetail and Cedarspike: *(Sparrowkit, a reddish-brown tom, and Finchkit, a pale tabby tom)*

Snowspirit and Darkcloud: *(Brightkit, a white tom with black ears and paws, Twisterkit, a white she-kit with black patches, Galekit, a dark gray tabby tom, and Magpiekit, a gray-and-white tabby she-kit)*

Elders:

Pigeonwhisker- Pale-gray-and-white tabby tom with yellow eyes. He

is the oldest cat in the Clan.

Pansypool- Pale tabby she-cat with reddish spots and amber eyes. She is a former healer of ForestClan.

Nightfeather- Long-furred, deep black tom with one white front paw and intensely yellow eyes.

Stormsong- Cheerful gray tabby tom with deep blue eyes.

WoodClan

Leader: Sequoiastar- Reddish-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Hazelshade- Grayish-brown she-cat with blue eyes.

Healers:

Nettlesting- Grayish-brown she-cat with green eyes.

Rootsnag- Cream colored tom with golden eyes.

Warriors:

Oakfoot- Older dark brown tom, amber eyes.

Cedarsweep- Brown tabby tom, amber eyes

Branchleg- Dark brown tom, pale green eyes and thick legs

Leafspeckle- Cream-and-brown spotted she-cat with pale green eyes

Peachpelt- Reddish tabby she-cat, golden eyes.

Lemonspice- Dusty yellow she-cat, amber eyes.

(Apprentice: Plumpaw)

Limeleaf- Pale tabby tom, green eyes.

Cherrypetal- Reddish she-cat, orange eyes

(Apprentice: Applepaw)

Apprentices:

Plumpaw- Reddish she-cat, golden eyes

Applepaw- Reddish tom, yellow eyes

Queens:

Magnoliafur- White she-cat, yellow eyes

Strawberryspots- Reddish she-cat, amber eyes and a white underside and paws

Jasmineflower- White she-cat, green eyes

Kits:

Strawberryspots and Oakfoot: (Almondkit, a dusky brown tom, Lentilkit, a brown she-kit, and Acornkit, a brown tabby tom)

MireClan:

Leader: Sedgestar- Light brown tabby tom, golden eyes

Deputy: Lizardfang- Tortoiseshell with amber eyes

Healer: Marshheart- Pale tabby tom, golden eyes

Warriors:

Toadstep- Spotted brown tom, orange eyes

Frogfoot- Spotted light brown she-cat, golden eyes

Mudrunner- Dark brown cat, fiery amber eyes

Heronfeather- Pale gray tabby she-cat, blue eyes

Storksong- Pale gray spotted tom, green eyes

Minkleap- Dark brown tabby she-cat, fiery amber eyes

Swampspots- Tortoiseshell with pale yellow eyes

Reedstreak

Willowshade

Mapleblaze

Queen: Heathflower- Brown tabby she-cat, golden eyes

Elders:

Iris-eye- Pale gray she-cat, blue eyes, one of which is blind

Wormfur- Tortoiseshell she-cat with white spots, amber eyes

MeadowClan:

Leader: Barleystar: Cream-and-white tom, yellow eyes

Deputy: Blossomspots: Calico she-cat, fiery amber eyes

Healer: Heatherheart: Dusty yellow she-cat, orange eyes

Warriors:

Flaxfur: Pale brown-spotted tom, orange eyes and a long tail

(Apprentice: Shrewpaw)

Garlicheart: Cream-colored tom, golden eyes

Onionleaf: Pale brown tabby tom, green eyes

Weedwhisker: Pale tabby, light green eyes and long whiskers

(Apprentice: Volepaw)

Gopherspring: Light brown tabby tom, golden eyes

Quailflight: Tortoiseshell she-cat, orange eyes

(Apprentice: Possumpaw)

Apprentices:

Volepaw: Dark brown tom, amber eyes

Shrewpaw: Reddish tom, orange eyes

Possumpaw: Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Elders:

Seedsprout: Brown tabby, green eyes

Brackenburn- Dusty yellow tom, fiery amber eyes

RockClan:

Leader: Thistlestar: Grayish-brown tom, golden eyes

(Apprentice: Lichenpaw)

Deputy: Ivoryclaw: Cream-colored she-cat, light green eyes and long claws

Healers:

Vinetrail: Speckled brown she-cat, light green eyes

(Apprentice: Fernpaw)

Pricklepelt: Light gray cat, amber eyes

Warriors:

Beetleleg- Brown tabby cat, long legs and fiery amber eyes

Antcrawl- Light brown tabby tom, orange eyes

Cricketridge- Pale tabby she-cat, brown eyes

Cicadaspot- Tortoiseshell with green eyes

Spiderstretch- Dark brown tom, orange eyes

Larchneedle- Light gray tom, pale green eyes

Hickoryroot- Gray tabby tom, dark blue eyes

Juniperhitch- Pale gray tabby she-cat, amber eyes

Apprentices:

Lichenpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat, amber eyes

Fernpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat, light green eyes

Queen: Waspflower: Pale tabby she-cat, amber eyes

Elders:

Roachrush- Battle-scarred dark brown tom, orange eyes

Cypressrise- Pale gray striped tom, light green eyes

GroveClan:

Leader: Pikastar- Brown tabby she-cat, light green eyes

Deputy: Tawnyhawk- Tortoiseshell she-cat, amber eyes

(Apprentice: Lemmingpaw)

Healer: Lavendarleaf- Deaf white she-cat, pale blue eyes

Warriors:

Wolfstride- Pale gray speckled tom, light green eyes

Lynxpounce- Pale gray speckled she-cat, icy blue eyes and long claws

Elkhorn- Cream-colored cat with golden eyes

Stagsnap- Ginger-and-white tabby tom, yellow eyes

Antlertwist- Cream-and-ginger tabby she-cat, amber eyes

(Apprentice: Adderpaw)

Bearheart- Thick-furred dark brown tom, orange eyes

Moosemyrtle- Thick-furred brown tabby she-cat, fiery amber eyes

Saffronsmolder- Ginger tom, golden eyes

Queens:

Doespeckle: Spotted light brown-and-cream she-cat, green eyes

Tanglethicket: Long-furred grayish-brown she-cat, icy blue eyes

Kits:

Doespeckle and Wolfstride: (Deerkit, a pale brown-and-white she-kit, Fawnkit, a pale brown speckled she-kit, and Caribоukit, a brown-and-white tom-kit)

Apprentices:

Lemmingpaw- Fuzzy dark brown she-cat, amber eyes

Adderpaw- Dark brown tabby tom, golden eyes

Elders:

Pepperpelt- Black-and-white spotted she-cat, icy blue eyes

Falconflight- Gray speckled tom, yellow eyes

Warblesong- Light brown spotted tom, pale green eyes

DeltaClan:

Leader: Claystar- Pale tabby tom, fiery amber eyes

Deputy: Shalestreak- Grayish-brown she-cat, pale blue eyes

Healers:

Brindleberry- Cream-and-light-brown tabby she-cat, orange eyes

Turtleswirl- Tortoiseshell she-cat, fiery amber eyes

(Apprentice: Streampaw)

Warriors:

Salmonscale- Large, silvery tabby tom, green eyes

(Apprentice: Shallowpaw)

Minnowflip- Pale gray tabby she-cat, long claws and golden eyes

Trouttrickle- Silvery tabby tom, very pale green eyes

(Apprentice: Finpaw)

Wavecrest- Pale-gray-and-white tom, light green eyes

Siltstripe- Brown tabby she-cat, amber eyes

Saltyrock- Cream-colored tom, amber eyes

Flintfade- Gray tabby she-cat, amber eyes

(Apprentice: Gillpaw)

Apprentices:

Streampaw- Black-and-white patched she-cat

Shallowpaw- Black she-cat with a white chest, paws, and muzzle

Gillpaw- Pale gray tabby tom, dark blue eyes

Finpaw- Grayish-brown tom, pale blue eyes

Queens:

Shellridge: Ginger tabby she-cat, yellow eyes

Dewdrop: Pale gray tabby she-cat, light green eyes

Elders:

Snailstripe- Ginger tabby tom, golden eyes

Otterclaw- Dark brown tabby tom, long claws, fiery amber eyes

Beaverbark- Dusky brown tom, golden eyes

ConiferClan:

Leader: Ospreystar- Brown-and-white tabby tom, orange eyes

Deputy: Kestrelspeckle- Pale brown-and-white tabby she-cat, golden eyes

(Apprentice: Wrenpaw)

Healer: Mallardwhistle- Brown tabby tom, pale green eyes

Warriors:

Owlfeather- Long-furred ginger-and-white tom, golden eyes

(Apprentice: Oriolepaw)

Eiderglide- Black-and-white tom with pale green eyes

Vulturestrike- Black she-cat with white points and intense yellow eyes

Eaglespring- Brown tabby tom with fiery amber eyes

Kitetip- Brown tabby she-cat, yellow eyes

Buzzardbeak- Black tom with a white muzzle and yellowish-green eyes

Apprentices:

Oriolepaw- Ginger tabby she-cat, amber eyes

Wrenpaw- Pale brown tabby tom, golden eyes

Elders:

Petrelpelt- Brown tabby tom with pale green eyes

Turkeytalon- Black-and-white speckled tom, golden eyes

Swanclaw- White she-cat with black points, intensely yellow eyes

Known Members of CliffClan:

Leader: Quartzstar- Cream-and-pale tabby tom, light green eyes

Deputy: Shardclaw- Blue-gray she-cat with vigorous yellow eyes

Healers:

Glimmermist- Blue-gray she-cat with orange eyes

Glistershine- Pale gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Jasperstripe- Tabby tom, amber eyes

Rubyrise- Ginger tabby she-cat, pale green eyes

Shattersweep- Pale gray tom with black flecks and yellow eyes

Opalstone- Cream-and-pale-tabby she-cat, orange eyes

Elders:

Obsidian-eye- Jet-black tom with fiercely bright golden eyes

Zirconswirl- Gray tabby tom with light blue eyes

Coalstone- Black tom with pale green eyes

Exiled:

Darkcloud (formerly Darkstar): A dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Ratchaser: Battle-scarred grayish-brown tom with fiery amber eyes

Twistedbramble: Pale tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Snakelash: Pale ginger speckled she-cat with golden eyes

Viperstrike: Pale tabby she-cat with white points and orange eyes

Rattleshake: Ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Kittypets:

Mango- Ginger tabby tom with pale yellow eyes

Pumpkin- Tabby she-cat with pale green eyes

Pearl- Cream-colored she-cat with yellow eyes

Strays:

Fang- Battle-scarred cream-colored she-cat with yellow eyes

Scratch- Grayish-brown tom with one pale blue eye

Screech- Skinny grayish-brown tom with three legs and green eyes

Bandit- One-eyed tan-colored tom with a black mask and paws, orange eyes

Barn Cats:

Chase- Gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Scramble- slender yellow tom with pale green eyes

Paisley- Pale tabby she-cat with blind golden eyes

Dog-pets:

Biscuit- A cream-colored dog with brown eyes

Roxxy- A small white dog with blue eyes

Rex- A tall, ginger-and-white dog with brown eyes

Grizzly- A thick-furred, dark brown dog

Chapter One

In the icy winter air, Twisterkit shivered. She watched her siblings fighting over a ball of moss in a shallow puddle of half-frozen mud. Her younger brother Galekit was hanging back, leaping out of the way any time they rolled near him. He quickly tired of the game, trotting over to join Twisterkit. "You're being rather quiet. Are you planning another heist?" he said breathlessly.

Twisterkit stood up and pawed at a scrap of moss on her brother's shoulder. "Shh, don't say that out in the open! Someone could hear us!" she hissed.

She glanced over her shoulder at the elders. They were chatting with Ravenflight, the senior medicine cat. Twisterkit turned her head to look at her mother, who was busy scolding Mousepaw about the half-hearted job he had done in the nursery. Snowspirit left him to redo it and made a beeline for her kits playing in the mud puddle.

The white she-cat loomed over her kits. "Did you absolutely have to roll in all that mud?" she said through gritted teeth. Brightkit and Magpiekit stopped in their play and looked up at her innocently. Snowspirit bared her teeth. "Now I have to wash all that off. And just when I thought I could get some rest." she said irritably.

Just then, two more kits raced out of the nursery. Finchkit and Sparrowkit leaped into the mud alongside their playmates. Dovetail followed more slowly. She paused when she saw Snowspirit glaring at the kits.

"How about you get some rest? Mousepaw will be done with your nest soon. I'll watch your kits for you." she offered.

Snowspirit turned around to touch whiskers with her. "Thank you, Dovetail. You always know just what a cat needs." she said gratefully. Snowspirit brushed past her and ducked into the nursery.

Twisterkit watched as her mother's fluffy white tail disappeared through the vines. Dovetail sat down on a flat rock and washed her paw, glancing over at the kits every once in a while. Twisterkit nudged Galekit behind a bush, where she continued the conversation.

"I'm waiting for the border patrol to come back. Once they get here, we can sneak out without worrying about running into them. But we should probably get dirty first, so our scents will be hidden. Plus, we'll blend into the ground." she explained.

Galekit looked confused. "Why would we need to be camouflaged?"

Twisterkit grinned widely. "We're going hunting." she whispered.

Just when she was poking her head out from behind the bush, Sandyfur and Robinsong entered the camp. Squirrelpaw and Daisypaw stepped in behind them. The border patrol was back.

Sandyfur wandered over and struck up a conversation with Mothtail. The two sisters had their backs turned to the kits' corner of the camp. It was the perfect distraction.

Quickly, Twisterkit pounced on Galekit. He flopped over into the mud, not putting up much of a fight. Galekit pawed at her while she rolled away before standing up and shaking out her mudstained fur, splashing a few final drops onto her brother. Galekit was absolutely covered in dirt now. Twisterkit could hardly recognize him.

Only a few tail-lengths away, the two sisters were still talking. Poppystar strode over to join her deputy. While the two seemed to catch up, Mothtail glanced over her shoulder at the kits before turning back to the conversation.

Twisterkit padded over to her siblings, who were rolling around in the mud with Mothtail's two tomkits. She pulled her little sister Magpiekit away from where she was watching her older brother Brightkit wrestling with Sparrowkit while his older brother Finchkit sat to the side.

The younger she-kit jumped, whirling around to face her older

sister. "Oh, hey, Twisterkit." she mumbled, looking embarrassed.

"We're going out. You wanna come with us this time?" Twisterkit asked cheerfully, omitting the 'breaking the rules' part.

Her sister looked around nervously before leaning in. "Where are we going?" she said in a low tone. "We're going hunting!" Twisterkit said passionately.

Magpiekit looked sad for a moment. "Oh, I probably won't catch anything. You guys go ahead, though."

Brightkit stepped over to give her an affectionate shove. "Oh, come on, Magpiekit. Stop being such a wet wad of moss and come with us this time." he encouraged.

His sister just shied back and shook her head. "I'm gonna go lay down. I'll see you guys soon though, right?" she said, solemn as ever.

Brightkit looked annoyed. "Why not? All we did last time was go look at the sand pit, but all you did was stay here to listen to the elders' stories." he complained.

Magpiekit shrugged. "It sounded really far away."

Brightkit gritted his teeth in frustration, but Twisterkit smiled knowingly. "That's all right. We'll see you soon."

She turned to her two brothers. "Let's go," she commanded.

Chapter Two

Outside, Twisterkit braced against the bitter cold. It was the very middle of winter now. The air was still, with no wind or rain and not a cloud in sight. But the air was almost painful to breathe in. A thin frost outlined everything in the morning sunlight, although it was melting away before their eyes. Icicles hung down from the trees, seemingly shining in the light. The forest was beautiful, but freezing cold.

Twisterkit gazed downhill, trying to remember which way they went last time. All of the dead leaves and bushes on the forest floor seemed to blend together. She paced around, picking up the scents of the recent patrol.

"This way!" she raced ahead through a cluster of tall, stiff yellow stalks. Brightkit followed closely, while Galekit struggled to keep up. "Wait on me!" her younger brother called.

Twisterkit skidded to a halt in the sandpit. She turned around, leaping out of Brightkit's way as he nearly collided with her. Galekit slowly trotted up to his siblings. "I didn't expect to run around out here," he panted.

"Maybe we should split up so we don't slow each other down. I mean, how would we hunt otherwise?" Brightkit suggested.

Twisterkit circled around in the sand, eager to hunt. "Of course we will. How would two cats stalk the same prey?" she snapped impatiently.

Brightkit nodded, then turned on his heels and sprang away through the trees, while Galekit wandered off into the bushes.

Twisterkit shivered in the cold air. She sniffed the ground, searching for any sign of prey. All she could smell was the fading scent of Squirrelpaw and another apprentice, either Lilypaw or Daisypaw. She paused to shake out her fur before trotting off into

the forest.

After only a few strides, she paused by an evergreen tree and listened intently. The last time she and her brothers were here, mice were running across their path. But now, all was quiet. Of course, last time it wasn't this cold.

She heard something- the flutter of wings nearby. Twisterkit turned towards the small thumps of tiny claws hopping along the forest floor. She silently stepped around the evergreen tree to peer at a robin pecking a some pinecones.

She dared to take a few steps closer. Only a few tail-lengths away, she could smell the bird. But just as Twisterkit was crouching down, she heard a yowl through the forest. The robin's head shot up.

Taking the chance, Twisterkit pounced. She drastically underestimated the distance and barreled into the bird, only to skid into another evergreen tree. The robin was tangled in her claws, thrashing around and chirping frantically. Twisterkit gripped it firmly to bite it on the back of the neck. It went limp in her paws.

She heard another yowl, much closer now. Twisterkit leaped out from under the evergreen bristles just as Shadowsweep burst through the forest.

"Thank SpiritClan you're safe!" she hissed, circling around the kit furiously. "Dovetail said you guys went inside the nursery but when I checked on Snowspirit you were gone!" she said worriedly.

"Well, I'm fine , so..." Twisterkit mumbled around her catch.

Shadowsweep stared at the robin for a long moment, eerily quiet. She straightened up suddenly as if she had just awoken from a nightmare.

"What?" Twisterkit demanded.

"You... you caught that?" the healer looked shocked.

Twisterkit puffed out her chest proudly. "Yep! All by myself!" she bragged.

Shadowsweep rubbed her eyes with a paw. "Woah. I think I just had a vision."

The kit's mind reeled. A vision? About what?

Before she could ask any questions, Sandyfur crashed through the underbrush and skidded to a halt in front of Twisterkit. "There you are! You and your littermate had the whole Clan terrified!" she scolded.

Twisterkit was unsure whether the deputy was being cheerful or irritated. "I caught a robin!" she declared. Sandyfur nodded hurriedly before looking around nervously. "Yes, yes, that's great. Let's get you back to camp before you freeze out here." she rushed.

When Snowspirit saw her kits prancing into the camp, she stood up alertly. But instead of love or pride, her eyes burned with fury. The queen marched firmly towards the mud-covered kits.

"How dare you!" she was looking at Twisterkit and no one else. "Again! For the second time in a moon!"

The young kit glanced around at her shameful-looking brothers for support, but they backed away silently. She humbly turned to face her mother, placing her prey at her paws. "But... I caught a robin," she looked at her mother for approval, but only saw her gritting her teeth in anger.

"You want it?" Twisterkit attempted a smile and nudged the bird towards Snowspirit.

"What do you think you're accomplishing!" the queen snarled. "What kind of mother would I be if I can't even keep my kits in the camp!" she lashed her tail passionately.

Sandyfur stepped in front of the kits defensively. "Alright, let's calm down now. They didn't make it that far, Snowspirit. It isn't the end of the world." she reasoned.

The queen bristled. "You calm down!" she snapped. Ravenflight rushed over to herd the kits inside the nursery, away from their furious mother. Twisterkit glanced over her shoulder to see the

white she-cat digging her claws into the frozen dirt, growling something at Shadowsweep.

Dovetail was in her nest, grooming Finchkit and Sparrowkit. Mothtail was awake, curled around her newborn kits. She looked up as Ravenflight corralled the kits into their nest, mumbling under his breath.

"Isn't that, like, the second time this moon? They're pretty good at sneaking out." Mothtail commented.

Ravenflight settled down in the moss and mumbled something to the queen, but Twisterkit was barely listening. She was pawing at Magpiekit, who was fast asleep beside her, completely oblivious.

Her younger sister blinked slowly. "Oh, hey, Twisterkit," she managed sleepily. Her expression turned darker. "I'm sorry, by the way."

Twisterkit curled up next to her, confused. "For what? All you did was hang out here while we snuck out." she reasoned.

"Oh. I kind of ratted you out." Magpiekit looked away quickly.

"Seriously?" Brightkit snorted from behind her. "Magpiekit totally snitched on us!" he snarled to Galekit beside him.

The young she-kit sighed. "Sorry. Dovetail asked me where you were and I didn't know what to say." she explained apologetically.

Brightkit glared at her. "Why didn't you just say we were with the elders or something?" he accused.

Magpiekit hung her head sorrowfully. "I know, I know. Next time we sneak out, I'll just... take a nap or something. Then I'll be out of the way." she said miserably.

"There won't be a next time." Ravenflight said suddenly, startling the four kits.

Magpiekit looked up at the healer sorrowfully. "You mean... we'll be kept kits forever?"

Ravenfligth shook his head. "No. Quite the opposite, in fact. You won't have to sneak out because Sandyfur is making you apprentices. The four of you are nearly seven moons old, for snakes' sake! My sister can't keep you in the nursery forever." he informed them.

Twisterkit's two brothers let out squeals of joy, while Magpiekit just looked relieved, if anything.

"When are we being made apprentices?" Twisterkit demanded. Ravenflight was already stepping towards the sunlight when he paused. "Tomorrow." he said simply, not even bothering to look back at the kits.

He was halfway out of the nursery when he glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, and Twisterkit," he grinned. "Nice catch."

Chapter Three

"So, who do you think's gonna be your mentor?" Mousepaw prodded at Magpiekit, who was picking apart the remains of a thrush.

The kit shrugged apathetically. "As long as it isn't my mother, I'll take it." she paused, then shook her head suddenly, as if remembering something. "I wanted to be a healer's apprentice, actually. But Ravenflight is training Sagepaw already, and Moonsweep... I can hardly stand her."

"Can anyone?" Mousepaw joked. He chuckled, but then his expression hardened. "But Sagepaw is just as old as Basilfang and Parsleyshade, and they've been warriors for at least a few moons. Surely he'll become a full healer soon. Then, you could be Ravenflight's apprentice. He seems to like you a lot." he suggested.

Magpiekit looked hopeful for once, but then turned her eyes back towards the scrambled bones of the thrush. She sighed softly. "Oh, yeah. But Galekit wants to be a healer, though. And I would probably forget all the herbs and stuff." she mumbled.

"Of course you wouldn't! And if you were a healer, you'd be able to do a bunch of stuff normal warriors don't do! Like going to the Moonpond, or getting prophecies and all that!" Twisterkit said cheerfully. Magpiekit let out a long sigh. "Yeah. Galekit would be really good at that." she commented sorrowfully.

"So, what about you? Who would you like as a mentor?" Mousepaw turned to Twisterkit.

"Oh. Um, what are the options?" she fumbled.

"Well, Cedarspike should be retiring any day now, along with his brother Pinebristle. And Crowpelt is... weird, I guess. I mean, very creepy. In a nice way." he stumbled. "Cardinalheart is pretty cool though. And Parsleyshade is pretty new, but I hear she's lots of fun.

And really nice. They all are, I mean."

Twisterkit nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. Got it. Who do you want your mentor to be, Brightkit?" she turned her head to her brother, who was busy poking at the feathers. "Who-What?" he looked up suddenly, glancing between Mousepaw and Twisterkit. "The what now?"

"If you could choose your mentor, who would it be?" Twisterkit encouraged.

"Oh. Poppystar, I guess." he shrugged.

"Poppystar? You do know how she was an elder when..." Mousepaw trailed of, casting a swift glance in Twisterkit's general direction. "You know, Marblestar died." he concluded.

"Yeah, but that's the point. Everyone knows I'm gonna be the next leader of ForestClan. Brightstar! The best leader there ever was!" he boasted, tilting his head proudly.

Twisterkit narrowed her eyes at Mousepaw. What happened when Poppystar became leader? Why was Mousepaw acting so weird about it?

She had heard Ravenflight once mention the leader Marblestar, her own grandmother. She was supposedly a dauntless and even she-cat, handling every tough situation with quiet determination. But no one ever said anything about how she died. Poppystar didn't seem to be that old, but had she really been an elder when she became leader? And why?

"Ew! I found a tooth!" Magpiekit squeaked. Sure enough, a curved fang rested between the bones of the bird. Twisterkit rushed over to get a closer look. "Cool! I think it's Pigeonwhisker's!" she grinned widely.

Mousepaw looked utterly disgusted. "Gross!" he whined.

Twisterkit smiled to the fullest extent. "Shall I go return it to him?" she offered.

The apprentice shuddered deeply. "No!" he pleaded.

"Cats of ForestClan, gather for a Clan meeting!" Poppystar yowled hoarsely from the leader's branch. Below her, Sandyfur was already perched on the deputy's boulder besides the leader's den between the roots of the giant tree. Twisterkit leaped up from the smooth rocks outside of the elder's den. "Come on, Magpiekit! Let's go!" she practically dragged her sister from the ground.

"Okay, okay, I'm going," Magpiekit complained.

Poppystar was swishing her tail back and forth from her spot on the lowest branch of the tree. She inspected the warriors collecting below her, then hunched over to mutter something to Sandyfur. The deputy nodded in agreement.

Snowspirit was busy, giving her kits some last-minute grooming. Brightkit shrugged her off while Margpiekit just looked tired as her mother aggressively licked the back of her neck.

Twisterkit craned her neck around to peer at the warriors. She squinted her eyes against the overhead sun as she tried to pick out their faces. But after only a few moments, the leader's voice snapped her back into the moment.

"Four kits have reached the age of which we may begin to guide them into their roles in the Clan." Poppystar said proudly. From somewhere in the back, Twisterkit recognized Stormsong's enthusiastic yell. The leader glared at him for a moment before continuing.

"Brightkit, from now on you will be named Brightpaw. Your mentor will be Parsleyshade." she declared. Brightpaw shot up as Parsleyshade bounced forwards to touch noses with him, giving the new apprentice an enthusiastic wink.

Twisterkit fought down a flash of jealousy as the pair drifted to the side of the camp.

"Twisterkit, from now on you will be named Twisterpaw. Your mentor will be Crowpelt." Poppystar announced. The new

apprentice felt only a slight edge of bitterness at her choice of mentor, but it quickly dissolved as she stepped forwards to touch noses with the deep-black tom. She waited an awkward heartbeat for some kind of response from her new mentor, but he just stared back at her darkly.

"Magpiekit, from now on you will be named Magpiepaw. Your mentor will be Snowspirit." Poppystar called. Twisterpaw hurried out of the way as her sister stood up to touch noses with her mother. For a heartbeat, the young she-cat hesitated, but her fate was already sealed. She looked no more sorrowful than ever, but Twisterpaw still felt a familiar twinge of pity for her sister.

Only Galekit was left now, looking nervous as ever. He seemed even smaller without his siblings by his side. He looked around nervously, but then his eyes found his mother and he seemed to relax.

"Galekit, from now on you will be named Galepaw. With the guidance of SpiritClan, your mentor will be Shadowsweep." the leader proposed.

The healer skipped over to the new apprentice and practically thrusted her face into his. Galepaw stumbled back a bit, but then smiled shyly.

Poppystar eyed the healer for a moment, but then hid any concern shown in her expression.

"This meeting is dismissed." she declared, preparing to spring down the tree.

Twisterpaw waited until a few cats had left before she stood up and shook out her pelt in excitement. She turned back to her new mentor, resisting the urge to turn in enthusiastic circles. "So! What's next! Do we go hunting? Do you teach me to fight?" she demanded.

Crowpelt stared back at her with his pale blue eyes. "I suppose," he sighed.

"So... what are we doing first?" Twisterpaw ventured.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked her evenly.

The apprentice hung back for a moment. "Really? You're letting me decide what we do first?" she nearly squealed.

"I don't really care." the tom shrugged.

Twisterpaw could feel herself grinning in merriment. What could go wrong?

Chapter Four

In the cold winter sun, Twisterpaw rolled in a pile of decaying leaves. She squinted up at the trees as she felt the cold detritus seeping into her pelt. It felt good. She rolled over and over again, refreshed by the shock of the cool mud.

"Seriously?" a voice broke through her merriment. Crowpelt was looming over her, carrying a weasel in his mouth.

"I was gone for a few heartbeats, and *this* is how you choose to spend your time?" he scolded.

"Oh. Sorry." Twisterpaw straightened up, shaking a few loose leaves from her pelt. "Well, I'm sure awake! What are we doing today?" she said expectantly. She remembered the day before, when her mentor had given in to her request to go hunting. She didn't catch anything, but at least she had a little fun. Crowpelt, however, seemed to be the opposite of fun.

"Today, I'm taking you to the lake." he said simply.

Twisterpaw felt a burst of fresh excitement. "Ooh! The lake!" she mused.

Crowpelt was burying his weasel between the roots of a tree. "Yes. The lake." he confirmed.

Twisterpaw heard a fluttering noise and looked over her shoulder to see a moth struggling through a slight breeze. When she looked back at her mentor, he was already halfway through the bushes. She trotted to keep up with his long strides as he ambled downhill.

"So... how are you doing?" Twisterpaw said cheerfully.

"Well, I'm not dead yet, so..." he grunted. "Could be better."

Twisterpaw noted the gray hairs on his muzzle. "Are you going to retire?" she asked.

"If I live long enough." Crowpelt said flatly.

After an unbearably long silence, Twisterpaw noticed a line of birch trees. "Is that the GroveClan border? I've never been this far. And further down is the... ConiferClan territory, right?" she buzzed.

Her mentor let out a long sigh, obviously not inclined to the idea of teaching his apprentice basic information. "Yes, that's the GroveClan border to the east of us. And no, the one next to it is MireClan. Then the lake, and to our west is WoodClan. Maybe we'll go up that border and see the Twoleg dens." he said plainly. "If I don't break my spine on the way." he added, half to himself.

"Twoleg dens?" Twisterpaw echoed.

"Yes. To the south of us is a cliff and cluster of Twoleg dens. Don't go up there. There's lazy kittypets trying to tempt our warriors into their life of captivity- sure, they have food and water, but one of our most basic rules is that no warrior must ever even think about joining them. Those spineless worms have everything handed to them while we hunt and fight for our very survival, and even then, every so often, one will wander into Clan territory. It is a warrior's responsibility to make sure those pests don't poison the minds of our kits..." he rambled on, but Twisterpaw was barely listening.

A strange scent had filled her nostrils- very similar to WoodClan, but slightly sharper. It could only be GroveClan. As the pair hiked steadily downhill, Twisterpaw smelled another scent, which could only belong to MireClan. The trees of the forest thinned out, and ahead she could make out tall sedges sitting in shallow water, just beyond a narrow strip of grass. Here the Clan scents mixed, although ever so slightly.

"Hello? Are you even listening?" Crowpelt snapped. Twisterpaw shook her head to clear her thoughts. "Um, sure, but maybe you could tell me about the Clans?" she suggested.

"Don't tell me what to do!" he snarled viciously. The young apprentice hung back, mildly frightened. "That's what I've been doing! Didn't you hear me explaining about the strays that live under the bridge that crosses the river to the east of ConiferClan?"

he said severely.

"Where's ConiferClan again?" she asked awkwardly. Crowpelt only gave a snort of annoyance as he clawed a tuft of grass with his claws.

"Could you at least tell me about the Clan leaders?" Twisterpaw requested.

"Wha- not here, bee-brain!" Crowpelt hissed.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"It's a Clan border. We can't stay here and chat. Now, let's keep moving!" he commanded.

They kept trekking by the marsh until they crossed over a ridge, and Twisterpaw's paws landed in soft sand. She slid down the ridge and landed in a heap, narrowly avoiding a cluster of sharp-looking rocks. She got to her feet and shook out the sand from her fur and stood up. For a moment the sun blinded her, but the view was amazing.

The lake was huge. It clearly reflected the brilliant blue sky and the valley on the horizon. Around the lake, a ring of beach separated the water from the woodland, but past the ForestClan and WoodClan territories, the fields and marsh and rocky terrain blended together.

Twisterpaw desperately tried to make sense of the landscape. "So, which Clans are which?" she pondered.

A few steps behind her, Crowpelt looked apathetic as ever. "You'll learn that eventually." he said simply.

"You mean you're not gonna teach me this stuff?" Twisterpaw growled furiously. She felt hot anger burning in her chest. "I can't believe this! You don't even like kits. You belong in the elders' den. You can't even be bothered to tell me basic information! Why did they even make you my mentor?" she protested.

Crowpelt stared back at her with his steady blue gaze. "I

specifically asked to be your mentor." he informed her.

"Why?! Honestly, you-" Twisterpaw began.

"Because if anyone else, things would be terribly unfortunate for you." Crowpelt said ominously.

"...What?" she hesitated.

"Oh, trust me." he narrowed his eyes at his apprentice. Suddenly, he looked moons older than he really was. For a long moment, neither cat said anything.

Crowpelt yawned casually. "Alright, let's go home." he proposed.

Twisterpaw nodded, her mind full of questions. "Okay," she agreed.

She followed the elderly warrior into the forest, but at the edge of the beach, she looked back. The lake glittered invitingly, practically begging her to jump in. Twisterpaw forced herself to turn her back to the scenery and weave herself into the dense forest.

Her mind still whirled with thoughts. Why did Crowpelt want to be her mentor? And what would happen if he wasn't?

Chapter Five

Twisterpaw brushed her pelt against the sides of the hollow log as she trailed after Crowpelt into the camp. The old tom made his way into the warrior's den without even looking at his apprentice. Twisterpaw stood at the entrance for a moment. Surely he would at least tell her to do something?

She blinked against the harsh light as she reflected. She had spent her entire morning learning from Mousepaw and his mentor Sprucefall as they taught the new apprentices the basic responsibilities. At first it was interesting, making nests out of moss and treating ticks with prey bile. But by sun-high, Crowpelt had enough of Twisterpaw bugging him to show her the territory.

Now she looked around the camp, searching for her siblings. Magpiepaw and Brightpaw were nowhere to be seen, so she went to the one place she was sure to find her younger brother- the healers' den.

In the hollowed-out cave, Galepaw looked busy. He was crouched in front of an arrangement of herbs, looking confused. Shadowsweep was impatiently pointing to them one at a time. "No, Galepaw, this one's dill. Come on, you just saw this a moment ago!" the healer said, frustrated.

"How am I supposed to tell? It looks exactly like fennel!" Galepaw shook his head angrily, lashing his tail. "Whatever. They all smell the same. But can't I take a break now? We've been doing this since the crack of dawn!" he pleaded.

"Alright, fine, but you're cleaning up this mess." Shadowsweep turned towards the exit but seemed to startle at the sight of Twisterpaw.

"Oh, Twisterpaw! Did you see the lake? Pretty cool, right?" she greeted. The apprentice was briefly reminded of her strange

conversation with her mentor, but shook off any lingering doubt.

"Yes, it is. Can I talk to Galepaw?" she requested. Shadowsweep glanced back at the apprentice, who was bitterly collecting the herbs with his tail. "Don't bunch them up like that! You've got to sort them before you put them away!" she scolded.

Galepaw furiously spread them out again and dragged together similar-looking leaves with his claws, muttering under his breath. Shadowsweep looked as if she wanted to correct him, but instead snorted indignantly and stalked away.

"So, how's it going?" Twisterpaw said brightly.

"I spent all morning trying to guess which herbs are which. And now I've got to clean up this mess!" Galepaw grumbled.

"At least you won't do it alone," Twisterpaw offered. She pawed apart the stuck-together herbs. It made an even bigger mess, but at least now they could see everything.

"Where's Magpiepaw and Brightpaw?" she asked. Galepaw shrugged unceremoniously as he shook off a root clinging to his claws. "Beats me. This morning, Brightpaw said something about going hunting with his new friends. And I know Snowspirit is teaching Magpiepaw how to do apprentice stuff." he informed her.

"That's strange. The three of us learned all that this morning." Twisterpaw recounted.

"Apparently she's doing ...more of that," he said absent-mindedly.

Now all the herbs had been sorted, and Galepaw took each bundle in his mouth to put it up. Twisterpaw looked around the healers' den while his back was turned. She admired the smoothed-clay walls that gave off an orange glow to the space, making the mossy nests look even more cozy. Twisterpaw was tempted to lie down in one, but just as she was stepping forwards, she heard paw steps at the entrance.

Cardinalheart poked his head into the den. "Hey, Twisterpaw! What's going on in here?" he said cheerfully.

"Oh, not much. I was just helping Galepaw put some herbs away." she waved her paw at her brother. "He was just about to... what are you doing?" Twisterpaw looked back at the gray tabby tom, who was padding over to join them.

"I was going to take a walk, but it would be better if I had someone to go with." he suggested.

Cardinalheart smiled. "Well, shall we?"

Galepaw glanced around at the healers' den before turning back to the warrior. "Sounds like a plan." he agreed.

"Where did you and Crowpelt go?" Cardinalheart asked as they hiked up the hill. Twisterpaw once again thought back to the tom's strange words.

"He showed me the GroveClan and MireClan borders. And we went to the lake. He's probably asleep now, though, but I think he's taking me on a patrol sometime." she informed him.

"Would you like to go on the dusk patrol? We're going to the Twoleg dens and the WoodClan border. You haven't seen that, have you?" Cardinalheart offered.

"That would be nice. I haven't been to the Twoleg dens yet." Twisterpaw said.

Cardinalheart glanced back at Galepaw behind them, who was clearly struggling on the uphill climb. The warrior lowered his voice. "Is it just me, or is Crowpelt a little... off?" he said quietly.

"Well... yes, if you meant completely apathetic." Twisterpaw critiqued. "He could put in a little more effort into, you know, teaching me the things I need to know."

There was a pause. Twisterpaw wondered for a moment if she should feel guilty about saying that about her mentor.

"I wanted to mentor you," Cardinalheart admitted.

Twisterpaw drew back her head. "What? Why me?" she demanded,

thoroughly confused.

"Well, your father was... a lot of things. But he was my mentor. And you remind me a lot of him. In a good way, you know. Never mind what the others think." Cardinalheart said plainly.

"What are you talking about? You mean some cats don't like my father?" the apprentice flattened her ears.

"You don't remember him, do you?" Cardinalheart said sadly. "Of course not. You were very young at the time."

Twisterpaw felt conflicted. What was he saying?

"What happened when I was young?" she pried.

"Oh, your father... was exiled. He broke the rules." the warrior explained simply.

Neither cat said anything as they continue their journey uphill, but Twisterpaw was absolutely itching with questions. Why was everyone acting so weird about her father? And who was he, exactly?

Chapter Six

"Woah. It's so high up," Twisterpaw commented as she craned her neck to peer above the cliff. Barely visible above the rocks was a row of wooden structures.

"If you can see it, the fence is a little ways away from the edge. Beyond that is where the Twolegs live." Mousepaw explained.

Further away from the rocky wall, Brightpaw looked unimpressed. He circled around in the prickly dead grass, trying to get a clear view of the fence. A deep frown darkened his features as he strained his eyes to see through the orange sunset. "Can we go up there?" he ventured. He turned to the rest of the patrol. "I think I can climb up there. It isn't too steep." the apprentice remarked.

His mentor Parsleyshade stepped forwards, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "I don't know. Can we, Sprucefall?" she grinned kittishly at the elderly tom.

Sprucefall shook his head. "Even if you could, it might go against the leader's rules. We aren't supposed to interfere in the lives of kittypets." he said sternly.

"Aw, but I *so* could make that jump!" Brightpaw complained. Beside him, Mousepaw gave him a flick of his tail. "You heard him. We shouldn't go up there. Plus, what if a kittypet attacks you? It would be intruding on their territory." he reasoned.

"You think I can't take on a kittypet?" Brightpaw snarled, unsheathing his claws. Mousepaw stepped back awkwardly. "No, of course not." he said humbly.

His head shot up as he reconsidered. "I mean, no, of course you would win a fight against a kittypet." he corrected himself.

"No one's fighting any kittypets," Sprucefall growled sternly. "All right, now that Brightpaw and Twisterpaw have seen the fence, we

shouldn't waste any time bickering about it. Come on, Mousepaw." the old tom ordered.

His apprentice dutifully followed him as he walked back to the edge of the forest. Parsleyshade took a step towards them, but then lingered back with Brightpaw and Twisterpaw. "I would have let you guys go up there, but I don't make the rules." she said apologetically.

"That's fine. When I'm leader, I'll make it so that any ForestClan cat can go into a kittypet's territory." Brightpaw promised.

Parsleyshade looked unsure. "It's considered Twoleg territory, since not all Twoleg dens are kittypet's land. And according to our current rules, it would have to go both ways. How would you like it if a housecat could wander into your hunting grounds whenever you want?" she said.

Brightpaw looked discouraged for a moment. "Oh. I guess you're right." he admitted.

Twisterpaw gave him a look as they trotted to catch up with the older warriors, who were deep in conversation just out of earshot. "Why would you want to go up there?" she said accusingly.

"Why not? Aren't the kittypets always coming down here? You were just telling me about Crowpelt fighting them off." he reminded her.

"Well, yeah, but that was just one of Crowpelt's stories. And I'm sure housecats don't want to invade ForestClan." she said with certainty.

"Even if they do, they'll be no match for me!" Brightpaw puffed out his chest ceremoniously.

Sprucefall and Cardinalheart were sniffing at a tree at the edge of the forest. Sprucefall called out something to Parsleyshade and she raced over. "What? Really?" she snorted. "I can't believe this."

Brightpaw brought out his claws once again. "It looks like a kittypet marked on a ForestClan tree!" he let out a ferocious growl.

"When I find those pesky flies, I'll rip their eyes out!" he threatened.

"Calm down, you. And that scent is obviously WoodClan." Twisterpaw scolded.

"Oh. Well in that case, when I find those sly little-" her brother began.

"How did you know that was WoodClan?" Mousepaw broke in. Twisterpaw jumped, but quickly located him in the shadow of a dark green bush. The apprentice padded into the sunset to join the siblings. "You haven't been anywhere near here, have you?" he observed.

"Crowpelt mentioned something about the salty pellets they eat, and how they smelled like dust because of it. This scent doesn't smell salty or dusty. I can only assume it's WoodClan because it smells like their territory the most. And besides, what cat would leave their scent between two Clan borders?" Twisterpaw explained.

Mousepaw nodded thoughtfully. Behind him, Cardinalheart stalked over and nudged the apprentice on the shoulder. Twisterpaw drew back her head for a moment. Mousepaw was taller than Cadinalheart! How had she not noticed before?

"Pay attention, you. This is important." the warrior commanded, unusually sharp. Without a word, Mousepaw pricked his ears towards his mentor up ahead.

Sprucefall turned back to his patrol. "It appears as though several WoodClan cats have crossed our border." he reported.

"What are we going to do about it?" Parsleyshade asked, her owlish eyes widening considerably.

The senior warrior looked down at her severely. "Nothing, for now. But I'll be telling Poppystar about this." he said, with a slight edge of annoyance.

Parsleyshade ran ahead to check any other trees along the border. "Come on, Brightpaw! Let's go check for intruders!" she challenged over her shoulder. Brightpaw bounded after her.

Sprucefall watched the two racing off through the forest and shook his head disapprovingly. "Imagine mentoring an apprentice like that. No structure. No order. Soon he'll be out of control, with a mindset like that." he commented gravely.

Twisterpaw sniffed at the ground. The WoodClan scent was similar to ForestClan, although much sharper. The two territories didn't show much difference, though. The cats were walking through the same forest all around, with the only sign of another Clan being the difference in scent and the claw-markings on the trees.

"What are those?" Twisterpaw waved her tail at the markings. Cardinalheart, who was sniffing at a fallen branch, hitched his head at the trees. "Oh, those? WoodClan cats leave claw-marks on the trees. Apparently they have different meanings." he informed her.

"Oh. Do we do that?" the apprentice questioned.

"No, it's one of those things each Clan does differently." Cardinalheart tilted his head. "Hasn't Crowpelt taught you anything? Notable members of each Clan? Landmarks? Practices of each Clan?" he asked.

Twisterpaw tried to recall any useful information her pessimistic mentor had given her. "Well, he did tell me about kittypets. I think. He doesn't like them very much." she offered.

Cardinalheart shook his head. "Well, each Clan is different, as you know. In some, the leader may not have as much power, or in others they have certain ceremonies, for example. Like how ConiferClan cats dig tunnels and how MeadowClan apprentices may have multiple mentors." he detailed.

Twisterpaw was quiet for a moment as the two walked along the border. She narrowed her eyes, burrowing deep into her brain to remember the locations of the Clans, but she gave up after a few heartbeats. "Speaking of mentors, why aren't *you* my mentor?" she said openly.

Cardinalheart seemed to straighten up. "Oh, I was too young. I've only been a warrior for a few moons." he brushed her off, trying to

cut ahead.

The apprentice darted ahead of him. "But Parsleyshade and Basilfang are moons younger than you. And they both have apprentices now." she retorted.

The warrior simply curved around her and kept walking. "Yes, but they're Poppystar's kits. Of course they would have that to their advantage." he turned his head so that Twisterpaw couldn't see his expression.

"That's right! I'm so important Poppystar made me the apprentice of her own daughter!" Brightpaw said loudly from ahead. Twisterpaw jumped. "Have you been listening to us?" she growled. Her brother obliviously laughed. "How could I not?" he said daringly.

Cardinalheart chuckled good-naturedly. "It's fine though, we weren't discussing anything important." he said, suspiciously brightly.

Twisterpaw felt a twitch of suspicion. Why was he acting like this was some big secret? She was going to get to the bottom of this.

Chapter Seven

Twisterpaw blinked rapidly against the bitterly cold, still air. This was real pain, unlike any cold she had ever felt before. It wasn't all real, of course. She had been having weird dreams all night. But in the dense bluish fog there were no flying mice or talking snowflakes. There was only an eerie mist and a deafening silence, as far as the eye could see and as far as the ears could hear. But this was so *real*. It had to be a dream, though. Right?

The lucid cold bore deeply into her fur. Twisterpaw stepped back in an effort to avoid the harsh prickling, only to find she couldn't feel her paws and tail. She could only watch in terrified fascination as the bluish, frozen-over grass shifted around her.

She looked around frantically as she remembered a tale Stormsong loved to torment the kits with. The Frozen Forest, where evil cats went when they died. It was exactly like this- cold, creepy, lots of mist, and...

Twisterpaw crouched low when she saw it: the outline of a tall and slender cat. She was frozen in panic, unsure whether to risk running away from whoever was approaching her. If she could miraculously unstick her paws from the permafrost without them falling off, she wouldn't make it a few steps before the strange cat would catch up to her.

She flattened her ears and hissed as the mysterious stranger glided closer. His slender paws effortlessly brushed the grass before he stopped, barely a tail-length in front of her. His dark gray pelt reflected the sinister glow from above as he leaned over the apprentice, who hissed again.

Twisterpaw dared to look up, but was met with a shock. "Crowpelt? Wha- why am I dreaming about you?" she fumbled over the echoes her voice set off. It sounded like many cats whispering from far away.

The tom glared at her through his ghostly blue eyes. "This is no dream, Twisterpaw. Haven't you heard this story already?" he leaned closer, sending a fresh chill in her direction. "This is where evil cats go when they fall die, or..." he trailed off ominously.

Twisterpaw shivered intensely, recalling the elders' chronicles. She felt a familiar spark of anger as she struggled furiously against the frozen mud that imprisoned her paws. "But I'm not evil. You know that, right? There's got to be some mistake." she growled, trying to shake off the icy grip climbing through her bones. The mud had already consumed her paws and was working on her legs as she struggled furiously.

A slight breeze agitated the pale grass, which brushed against her chest. In her fury, the apprentice bit at it. The frosted blades were bitter, bringing a new wave of cold that radiated to the tips of her ears.

Crowpelt silently eyed her. "Oh, and by the way, anything that freezes and falls of in here, well, it freezes and falls off in real life." he warned.

Twisterpaw's head shot up. "Really?" she said in a panic.

Her mentor seemed to take amusement from her predicament. "Oh, who knows. Want to stick around and find out?" he said menacingly.

Before the apprentice could say anything, she felt a sharp pressure on her nose. The edge of her vision wavered for a moment, but then returned to her nightmare.

Crowpelt stood back, tilting his head to the side. "Looks like you're waking up. I'm just gonna... go..." he turned on his heel and vanished into the mist. Twisterpaw froze in place, stunned. Did her mentor just leave her to die here? And why was her nose hurting so much?

Her racing mind was smothered by a wave of confusion as her dream unfocused for a few moments. Was she waking up? Dying? Being thrown into another nightmare?

Everything straightened out just as quickly as it had ripped apart, although Twisterpaw was only surrounded by darkness. Before she could even register where she was, her world crumbled in on itself and she fell into the unimaginably dark void.

Twisterpaw awoke with a start. She was laying on her back in a shallow nest, blinking in the invasive sunlight. Brightpaw had his jaws clamped firmly on her nose. He fidgeted in his sleep and bit down harder, sending out a new bolt of pain.

She growled and batted at her brother, who let go and rolled over. The white tom barked in his sleep and dug his claws into the gray-and-white fur of his younger sister, who kept snoring away.

After a few long moments of recollection, Twisterpaw sat up and looked around. The den was empty except for the three siblings. Brightpaw was digging his teeth into Magpiepaw's front leg, but she only continued to mumble in a low tone. Finally, the young apprentice opened her eyes and lifted her head. The gray-and-white she-cat yawned and shook off her older brother, who began to gnaw on his own tail.

"Oh, hey, Twisterpaw. Have you been awake?" she said quietly, narrowing her eyes against the midday sunlight streaming into the den.

Twisterpaw shook her head, half to clear her mind of the lingering drowsiness. "Oh, no. I just now woke up. I had some weird dreams." she shrugged.

Magpiepaw nodded, only half-awake. "I had a dream I could fly," she said almost gleefully.

"What's up with you three? You've been sleeping all day!" a voice broke through their peaceful den. Shadowsweep poked her head in, glaring at the apprentices. "Won't you come out so Galepaw can stop asking me where you guys are?" she said with a hint of annoyance.

Twisterpaw jumped to her feet while Magpiepaw nearly fell over trying to stand up. She staggered after her older sister, mumbling

under her breath.

Outside, Galepaw was sitting by the prey-bush, about to dig into a black-and-white woodpecker with a brilliant red spot on the back of its neck. He paused when he spotted his siblings, shuffling back to make room for them. "Have you been sleeping all day?" he guessed, eyeing their ruffled pelts.

Magpiepaw plopped down next to him and muttered something and dragged over the bird. She bit into it sharply, splattering blood on her muzzle.

"What have you been doing?" Twisterpaw prodded her younger brother.

"I've been up since the crack of dawn collecting herbs. We went all the way to the-" Galepaw began to explain, but was cut off abruptly.

"Wait. Why did we sleep all day?" Twisterpaw glanced around the camp at the cats, who mostly were eating their prey. Parsleyshade was chatting with her brothers Basilfang and Sagepaw as her mother pawed at a mouse beside them, but neither Crowpelt or Snowspirit were in sight.

"Oh. Snowspirit didn't want you guys to be woken up. I didn't hear the exact conversation, but Shadowsweep said something about it. Isn't it kind of weird, though?" Galepaw questioned.

Magpiepaw looked up from the bird, which she had cut open down the middle with a claw. "I'm not complaining. We got to sleep in, didn't we?" she pointed out.

"But why? We've gotten up early practically every day of our training so far." Twisterpaw said as she put a paw to her forehead, trying to make sense of the situation. She still felt drowsy, even though she had slept until sunhigh.

"Hey, you guys! Guess what Parsleyshade just told me!" Brightpaw yowled from across the camp. Behind him, Poppystar eyed the white tom critically. The young apprentice obliviously sprang over to his siblings. "We're going to a gathering!" he practically squealed.

"Oh. Cool." Magpiepaw said expressionlessly. Galepaw and Twisterpaw looked at each other for a moment before turning to Brightpaw to ask an assortment of questions.

"Why us?"

"When is it?"

"Who else is going?"

"What's a gathering, again?"

Brightpaw looked between them for a few heartbeats, then held up a paw. "All I know is Sprucefall caught a case of frostcough, so of course Parsleyshade is going to represent him, being his daughter and all. And she's asked *me* to tell everyone about some trees that were marked incorrectly!" he said excitedly.

"But are we going?" Galepaw specified.

"Of course! Poppystar herself said she wanted the two of us to go to the Gathering!" he said triumphantly.

"There's four of us, Brightpaw. Did you really forget that?" Magpiepaw mumbled around a mouthful of woodpecker.

"Oh, I know. Only Twisterpaw and I are going." he said, as if it was a well known fact.

"Why me?" Twisterpaw asked.

Brightpaw tilted his head for a moment. "I don't know, really. Crowpelt said you should go." he detailed.

Twisterpaw leaned back. "But why?" she pried.

Her brother shrugged. "I don't know. He seems to like you, though. I wonder why." he joked.

Twisterpaw nodded thoughtfully, but her mind was going to dark places. Why did Crowpelt want her to go to a gathering? And more importantly, why did she have a weird dream about him?

But maybe it wasn't a dream. She might have really been in the Frozen Forest. But she wasn't evil... was she? The worst thing she had ever done was sneak out of camp.

She squashed down a twist of frustration, which was immediately replaced by worries. She had never been to a gathering before. Were the other Clans friendly? She had heard some shady rumors about each of them. CliffClan cat's don't eat there own kits, right?

Twisterpaw stood up to shake out her pelt. She shouldn't worry- if she could keep Brightpaw out of trouble, everything would be fine. As long as her fiesty brother didn't start a war, nothing could go wrong. Right?

Chapter Eight

Snow drifted down from the dark sky, gathering on the pelts of the ForestClan patrol. Although it fell slowly, it blinded the cats, smothering them in white flakes. Twisterpaw strained her eyes to see Brightpaw's tail through the flurry. His white fur blended in perfectly, and soon the apprentice lost sight of her brother. She glanced around in frustration before locating Mousepaw's pale tabby pelt through the storm.

She shifted over to him, wading through the snow. "Are we lost? We've been walking for ages!" the she-cat complained. "I think we're going in circles!"

Mousepaw shook his head. "I can see Parsleyshade and Cardinalheart ahead of us. As long as we follow them, we won't get lost." he reminded her.

The ground suddenly slanted downwards. Twisterpaw spread out her paws in the frozen sand as she slid down a sand dune. She could barely make out Mousepaw's fur against the blinding snow, but further ahead she spotted the silhouettes of Parsleyshade and Cardinalheart. The she-cat leaped onto the shore and raced to keep up.

Black water threatened the cats from below as they crossed over the strange wooden structure. Twisterpaw had never been outside of the ForestClan territory, nor had she seen water as malicious-looking as this. The lake stared back at her menacingly as she huddled close to Mousepaw.

A few moments later, her paws connected with land. The sharp pebbles were unforgiving on her paw pads, but when she looked up from her already-aching paws, she couldn't believe her eyes. Cats from all Clans were gathered in a clearing, surrounded by a few towering evergreen trees. There were more cats than Twisterpaw had ever seen before, all gathered in the hollows where they were sheltered from snow.

On the far side, where there was a few corpses of bushes, a strange gray structure stood out from the rocky ground. On it sat five cats, and below them were five more.

Twisterpaw gave Mousepaw a nudge. "Those are the leaders, right? And the deputies?" she asked eagerly. The older apprentice brushed her off. "Yes, yes. Crowpelt really didn't tell you anything, did he?" he said distractedly, scanning the crowd.

He suddenly sprang away into the swarm of pelts. Twisterpaw looked back at the rest of her patrol, who had spread out among the strange cats. Having nowhere else to go, she quickly followed Mousepaw as he ran to the edge of the clearing. Here, a few unfamiliar cats were gathered in the shade of a few tall, dark green bushes.

Brightpaw suddenly whirled past her, nearly knocking her over. "Hey, guys! I'm Brightpaw! Nice to meet you!" he almost squealed at the cats. Mousepaw gave him an affectionate nudge. "Calm down, Brightpaw," he said good-naturedly.

Twisterpaw parked herself besides her brother, placing her tail on one of his front paws. He was the rowdiest apprentice in ForestClan. Could he be trusted to make a good impression?

"These are two of our newest apprentices, Brightpaw and Twisterpaw. And these are my friends." Mousepaw announced. The strange cats gave a few words of acknowledgement, but not much else.

For the first time, Twisterpaw studied the cats. She identified a light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes and a fuzzy dark brown she-cat with amber eyes, but the mist of the winter night shrouded the others in fog. Mousepaw was talking to a ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes, leaving Brightpaw and Twisterpaw on their own.

"Hey, you guys! I'm Lemmingpaw. Over there's my brother Adderpaw. Is this your first gathering?" the fuzzy dark brown she-cat said openly. Twisterpaw recognized the scent of GroveClan.

"Oh, no. We've been coming here for moons." she said sarcastically.

Brightpaw tilted his head and gave her a look. "Wha- no, we haven't! We became apprentices barely a quarter-moon ago!" he said loudly.

"I know. That's the joke." Twisterpaw informed him.

"I'm Possumpaw. It's nice to meet you," the light gray tabby she-cat spoke quietly. Brightpaw plopped down besides her and began asking an arrangement of questions.

"So, what Clan are you from?" he demanded.

"Oh. MeadowClan."

"Who's your mentor?"

Possumpaw spoke almost inaudibly, but Brightpaw's voice practically echoed around the clearing. Twisterpaw signed and turned to Lemmingpaw. "Which one's Adderpaw, again?" she said, sounding more irritated than she actually was.

"Oh, he's the dark brown tom talking with Mousepaw. The ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes is Oriolepaw from ConiferClan. Besides her is Fernpaw. She's the tortoiseshell with green eyes." she explained.

Twisterpaw sat back. "Wow. So many names," she muttered.

"Don't worry, you'll get to know all of us eventually. Almost all of the Clan are here now. We're just waiting on MireClan and the StoneClans." Twisterpaw recognized the term for the Clans that resided in the rocky terrain of a mountain. But what were their names, again?

Lemmingpaw nodded at the entrance to the clearing as a light brown tabby tom with golden eyes stepped through.

"That's Sedgestar, the leader of MireClan. He's such a grumpy elder. And the tortoiseshell behind him is his deputy, Lizardfang. They got their name because of that weird tooth growing out of their muzzle. How weird! I think it's genetic, since their mother Wormfur has the same thing." Lemmingpaw explained.

"Oh, that's cool. So which leader is which?" Twisterpaw asked intently, eyeing Sedgestar as he practically shoved Poppystar out of his way on top of the gray structure. The ginger she-cat simply shuffled out of his way as he planted himself on his perch.

Sandyfur growled something at Sedgestar, earning a cruel remark from Lizardfang. Twisterpaw couldn't hear what they were saying, but it sounded personal.

"You already know Poppystar and Sandyfur, obviously. And Sedgestar and Lizardfang from MireClan." Lemmingpaw stated, drawing Twisterpaw's attention back to the conversation.

"The reddish-brown she-cat next to Poppystar is Sequoiastar of WoodClan, and her deputy is Hazelshade, the grayish-brown she-cat. You see the cream-and-white tom with yellow eyes? That's Barleystar, the leader of MeadowClan. He's had, like, eight mates in his lifetime. There's some rumors going around that he's in love with Seqouiastar. I mean, those two would be *so* cute together, wouldn't they?" Lemmingpaw giggled.

"Um, you were saying about the leaders and deputies?" Twisterpaw said unevenly.

"Oh, right. Well, the MeadowClan deputy is Blossomspots. She's the calico talking to Hazelshade."

"Oh... Who's Hazelshade, again?" Twisterpaw tried to sound serious.

"On the far end, there's Pikastar and Tawnyhawk of GroveClan. They're my parents." Lemmingpaw said matter-of-factly.

"Woah. Your parents are the leader and deputy of GroveClan?" Twisterpaw grinned. "That's so cool."

Lemmingpaw seemed to shy away. "I was told not to brag or anything. Adderpaw, on the other hand..." she glanced over at the dark brown tom, who was no doubt showing off some battle moves to the other apprentices. Mousepaw and Brightpaw watched him in awe, captivated by his performance. The ginger she-cat, Oriolepaw,

rolled her eyes at the tom.

"Pikastar is the small brown tabby. She's really kind. And I'm not just saying that to be nice." Lemmingpaw continued. "And her deputy is Tawnyhawk, my mentor. She's the tortoiseshell with amber eyes."

Twisterpaw studied the cats on the metal structure. "Aren't there nine Clans?" she racked her brain for names. ForestClan, WoodClan, GroveClan, ConiferClan, DeltaClan, MeadowClan... two were missing.

"A lot of the time, the StoneClans don't even show up for gatherings. Especially CliffClan. They almost never make an appearance." Lemmingpaw explained.

Just then, Sedgestar stood up and let out a loud yowl. "All cats, please lend us your ears!" he roared. The chatter in the clearing slowly faded out as he swung his head around, glaring at the cats as if he had a bone to pick with each of them. "The gathering has begun." he announced.

Chapter Nine

Sedgestar sat back, studying the crowd for a moment. "MireClan has recovered from a prey shortage following the first frost. Since then, a beast has been detected on our territory. I believe Frogfoot would like to share information regarding the recent sightings of an otter." he stated clearly.

A spotted light-brown she-cat stood up from her place in the crowd. "Yes, Sedgestar. As you may recall, a lone otter was driven away from DeltaClan territory shortly before the last gathering. A half-moon ago, it was spotted on our land. We drove it upstream and into ConiferClan territory, where we assume it fled into the hollow under the stone-path." she informed the cats.

"Thank you, Frogfoot. Did you encounter the otter, Ospreystar?" Sedgestar nodded at the brown-and-white tabby tom besides him. "One of our border patrols tracked the scent under the stone-path." the tom said simply. "It is gone now. All is well in ConiferClan. How about you, Claystar?"

A pale tabby tom sat up from where he had crouched between two of the leaders, barely visible. He cleared his throat nervously and looked down at the gray ledge beneath his paws. "Um, yes. DeltaClan is doing great. We have two new apprentices, Gillpaw and Finpaw. Flintfade and Trouttrickle are their mentors. Oh, and Dewdrop is now a queen." he said oddly.

A few warm yowls sounded from around the clearing. Twisterpaw craned her neck behind her to see two grayish toms, looking embarrassed as cats of all Clans yelled out their names. Gillpaw and Finpaw shied back, staring at the ground until most of the cats turned their attention back to the leaders.

"WoodClan has been even more prosperous than usual. However, I must mention a strange encounter with a kittypet. Lemonspice shall provide details." Seqoiastar said in a low tone.

At the far side of the clearing, a dusty yellow she-cat stood up. "Yeah, the weirdest thing happened about a half-moon ago. I was leading a hunting patrol when my apprentice was attacked by a kittypet! Can you believe that?" she said enthusiastically. "Anyways, the kittypet ran away and I totally tried to chase her. Then Peachpelt told us to not leave the territory without telling Seqoiastar. So I told her."

"Go on, Lemonspice." Seqoiastar urged, sounding almost bored.

"So then I told everyone and then I lead this awesome expedition into the Twoleg dens because of course this couldn't go unpunished. We tracked down the kittypet and she said she was hunting the same bird and totally pounced at the same time as Plumpaw. So we let her off with a warning and told her not to hunt on our territory." Lemonspice recounted.

"If anyone sees a tabby she-cat with pale green eyes, please let us know." Sequoiastar warned.

"We will keep an eye out." Poppystar nodded thoughtfully before sitting up slightly taller. "A few days ago, one of our patrols smelled a strange scent mark along the WoodClan border. Parsleyshade can tell you more about it." she turned her gaze towards her daughter.

"I was on a patrol, and we were going past the Twoleg dens. When we got to the WoodClan border, it was a little closer than we expected." Parsleyshade spoke clearly from where she sat beside Cardinalheart and a few other warriors. "My apprentice Brightpaw was there, and he can explain what we saw." she nodded at the white tom a few steps away from Twisterpaw.

Brightpaw stood up, seeming to revel in the attention of the cats around him. "I was on the patrol when we approached the border. But one of our trees was marked!" he said excitedly.

Seqoiastar tilted her head. "Oh, really?" she prompted. Poppystar opened her mouth to speak, but Brightpaw cut in.

"Yes, really! Your warriors were marking on our territory! You must have a death-wish to do something as stupid as that!"

Brightpaw snarled, apparently goaded by Sequoiastar's even expression.

A few cats began to whisper. Sequoiastar remained silent and unmoving as ever, but Poppystar lashed her tail and gave the apprentice a venomous glare. "That's enough, Brightpaw." she said dangerously.

"But they're intruding on our territory! What kind of cloud-brain would even think of challenging ForestClan?" the white tom protested loudly.

Without thinking much about it, Twisterpaw surged forwards and gripped her brother's face between her paws. "What kind of impression are you making, threatening a Clan leader like that!" she said through gritted teeth. "Don't you know when to quit?"

Brightpaw blinked rapidly as he sat down, gazing at his paws. It wasn't until Twisterpaw returned to her spot when she realized that her heart was pounding. On the gray structure, Poppystar was saying something to Sequoiastar.

"...only one tree. We hadn't visited that corner in a while, anyways. Do you mean to claim it?" she asked. Her voice was calm as ever, but her bushed-out tail told a different story.

"No. We have plenty of territory. Maybe one of our patrols got distracted and went a little off course." Sequoiastar growled, sounding professional but slightly strained.

"ForestClan has handled this snowy weather gracefully," Poppystar said, changing her tone to a more cheerful perspective. "Three kits have reached the age of three moons, at which our healers have named them. We welcome the newest offspring of Mothtail and Pinebristle: Amberkit, Mosskit, and Thornkit."

A pawful of cats yelled out their names, but Brightpaw and Twisterpaw looked at each other, confused. "New kits? I didn't know Mothtail's kits got named." Brightpaw whispered.

"We must have slept through it that day." Twisterpaw shrugged.

"Four new apprentices have begun their training. The Clan welcomes Brightpaw, Twisterpaw, Magpiepaw, and Galepaw." their leader announced.

Brightpaw puffed out his chest as the cats chanted the four names. Twisterpaw sat up straighter as Lemmingpaw gave her a flick of the tail. "Congratulations," the fuzzy she-cat murmured.

"Their mentors are Parsleyshade, Crowpelt, Snowspirit, and Shadowsweep. That's all the news I have to offer. What about you, Barleystar?" the tabby she-cat turned to the tall tom.

"MeadowClan has been absolutely thriving!" Barleystar purred, swishing his tail softly. "We have not one, not two, but three new apprentices! Everyone, please welcome Volepaw, Shrewpaw, and Possumpaw!" he said smoothly.

Possumpaw looked down at her front paws as the cats cheered for her and the two toms that stood up with their heads held high. She looked nothing like them, with her light gray tabby pelt clashing with their reddish and dark brown pigmentations. Twisterpaw narrowed her eyes at the she-cat, thinking hard. Her name... it wasn't a MeadowClan name, was it? And why wasn't she sitting with her siblings at the front of the crowd?

"Their mentors are Weedwhisker, Flaxfur, and Quailflight! They will do a fine job of training our future warriors." Barleystar said slowly, putting a paw to his chest for emphasis. "Oh, and Blossomspots is a queen. Take a wild guess who the father is- that's right, we're back together!" he announced.

A few of the elders grumbled to themselves, but Barleystar ignored the looks he was getting.

"Unfortunately, MeadowClan has also suffered a loss." he said, without his usual flair. "One of our elders, Seedsprout, has passed away due to a mild case of frostcough."

The cats were already silent, but many of them bowed their heads in acknowledgement. Barleystar licked his paw while some whispered prayers for the new SpiritClan warrior.

"Seedsprout will forever be remembered for their determination and accountability." Sequoiastar said solemnly, seeing as Barleystar wasn't taking the news seriously.

"GroveClan has been getting along well in this season of unfavorable conditions." Pikastar said quietly, although many cats pricked their ears to hear her. "Saffronpaw is now a warrior. He is not here, but I would like to recognize Saffronsmolder."

A few of the apprentices gave enthusiastic yells. Adderpaw, Volepaw, Oriolepaw... and at least two others.

"Tanglethicket is now a queen. She and Bearheart are very happy to have started a family together. And our senior healer, Pepperpelt, has retired. May she enjoy moons of rest for all she has done for GroveClan." Pikastar said cheerfully.

She looked over at Sedgestar. "That is all."

"This gathering is over." the tom grunted. "May you all have a safe journey home."

Chapter Ten

"So, what now?" Twisterkit still had her eyes trained on Sedgestar as the tom drifted through the crowd. "Are we leaving, or..." she trailed off, unsure. The leaders were jumping down from their perch, disappearing into the clearing where cats were now visiting with one another.

Lemmingpaw stood up and stretched. She shook out her pelt and shifted a little closer to Twisterpaw. "I guess you could leave if you want. But usually after a gathering, cats of all Clans visit with each other before regrouping and heading home, usually in the same order they came." she explained.

Twisterpaw broke away from staring at the unfamiliar clusters of cats. "How do you know all of this? How long have you been an apprentice?" she said, accidentally sounding accusing.

The fuzzy she-cat shrugged off her tone. "Seven moons. But I've only been coming here for the last four." she replied.

"I've been an apprentice for about... a few days." Twisterpaw felt a small flash of embarrassment, but almost immediately perked up again. "You're really observant, aren't you?" the black-and-white she-cat commented. "You'll be a warrior soon, no doubt about that."

"Oh... I guess so. But we'll see." Lemmingpaw shrugged once more.

"You remind me of my sister." Twisterpaw blurted.

"Who?" the dark brown apprentice pricked her ears, clearly thinking hard. "Is it Magpiepaw or Galepaw? Although I'm pretty sure Galepaw was a tom, last I heard..." she mumbled, half to herself.

"It's Magpiepaw. She isn't here tonight, though." Twisterpaw explained, mentally scolding herself for thinking out loud.

"Oh! You should meet my family!" Lemmingpaw suddenly jumped to her paws, apparently having a spark of energy. "They're really nice. Come on, I'll show you." she walked away towards the far side of the island, looking back to see if Twisterpaw was following.

The young apprentice stepped in her general direction, casting a glance at the others she was leaving behind. She did a double take when she saw both Sandyfur and the grayish-brown WoodClan deputy deep in discussion with Brightpaw. He nodded solemnly with his tail resting sorrowfully on the ground as Sandyfur viciously growled at him.

Behind Brightpaw, a few of the other apprentices giggled evilly. Possumpaw held back, though, as she hunched over and examined her paws. A tortoiseshell she-cat was sitting besides her, shooting glares at the apprentices who began to mock Brightpaw. Twisterpaw scrambled to remember their names. Oriolepaw, Adderpaw... Fernpaw! That was the name of the tortoiseshell she-cat. Didn't she have a sibling or something?

"Hey! Watch it, you little-" a sharp voice cut through her observation. Twisterpaw took her paw off of and elderly cat's tail as she backed up a few steps. "Oops! Sorry there!" she apologized to the brown tabby tom with pale green eyes. His scent was familiar to MireClan, although a bit... woodlike? Kind of like the slightly sweet smell of GroveClan, but dull and earthy. She glanced around him to see the brown-and-white tabby tom that only said a few words about... ConiferClan. The elder must be from ConiferClan.

He stood up abruptly, baring his teeth at the apprentice. "What are you looking at, you scrawny rat? You trying to start something with our leader?" he snarled. Twisterpaw took another step back and hissed quietly, remembering Cardinalheart's tales of the fierce and proud ConiferClan.

"No, of course not. Just... walking over there." she said humbly, flicking her tail in the direction she last saw Lemmingpaw.

"Come on, Twisterpaw! They're right over here!" she heard faintly over the chatter of the cats.

She gave the elder a small smile before trotting away towards Lemmingpaw, who was slipping through the low hanging leaves.

Pikastar and Tawnyhawk were sitting on some smooth boulders just outside of the treeline. The pebbles here gave way to chilly sand, a few moose-lengths away from the shore- or at least, what Twisterpaw could hear of it. The snow was falling thicker than ever out in the open, and Twisterpaw was standing right below the leader and deputy before she could even see the color of their pelts.

"Greetings, Pikastar. And hello, Tawnyhawk. It's so nice to meet you! I'm Twisterpaw. And I'm sorry if I get any Clan names wrong, it's my first gathering. But you guys are from GroveClan, right?" she tried to sound professional.

"Ah, yes. And your first gathering? My, you're small, Twisterpaw! How old are you?" Tawnyhawk said warmly.

"Oh. Um, six moons. I think. I became an apprentice... not that long ago." Twisterpaw felt her confidence fading around the edges.

"Well then," Pikastar leaned down slightly, her soft voice comforting the apprentice. "You must be special if they let you go to a gathering after less than a moon of training."

Twisterpaw chuckled to herself, feeling warm in the snowy darkness.

"Hey, Twisterpaw! Wanna come yell at Brightpaw for us? He's trying to start a fight!" a dark brown tom emerged from the mist, laughing sinisterly.

"Leave her alone, Adderpaw," Lemmingpaw stepped towards her brother, who practically towered over her. "She's talking to Mother and Father."

Adderpaw eyed Twisterpaw coldly through his golden eyes. "Really? Why don't you stay and babysit your brother for Sequoiastar? I think she's getting tired of-" he was cut off as Tawnyhawk growled. "Go lick a rock, you. And don't tell cats from other Clans what they should be doing." she said sharply. The dark

brown tom lowered his head, although he was still grinning widely.

"Yes, mother," he said, sounding serious yet sarcastic at the same time. Twisterpaw felt conflicted. Was he picking on her? For what? Or was he just joking about Brightpaw?

"Obviously Poppystar sent you here because you have a gift for leadership," Pikastar said in her soothing voice. "I mean, look at you! Talking to the leaders of GroveClan at your first gathering! Not to mention keeping your brother in line. He reminds me of my own Adderpaw." her light green eyes sparkled with merriment.

"Speaking of Brightpaw, I should probably go make sure he isn't starting some kind of war." Twisterpaw ducked her head respectfully to the pair. She turned to Lemmingpaw and smiled at her. "At this rate, I'll see you at the next gathering. Hopefully." the brown she-cat grinned back.

As Twisterpaw made her way back into the clearing, she glanced over her shoulder to see Adderpaw, thankfully with a cheerful expression. She had made a good impression- and to the leaders of GroveClan!

Her victory was soon dominated by dark thoughts. Now she had to deal with Brightpaw, who she could hear screeching from the far side of the island. She stepped her way into the clearing once more, shaking the snow from her pelt before angling her ears towards the apprentices, who were gathered loosely beneath the dark green bushes.

"But I'm right! You do smell like fish!" Brightpaw exploded at the two grayish DeltaClan apprentices that had been hanging back from the rest. They looked about his age, but Brightpaw was bigger than them, especially now when his hackles were raised and his tail was fluffed out. They crouched low to the ground. One gazed back at Brightpaw evenly, while the smaller one was practically cowering in fear.

Twisterpaw tried to run over to reach the white tom, but her paws protested painfully. Oh, well. They would be sore the next day anyways. She broke into a low trot and brushed past the tabby she-

cat Oriolepaw, whose pelt was also bushed out.

"Brightpaw, you keep to yourself!" she snapped. Her brother whirled his head around, but quickly turned his attention back to the two toms. "I guess it's true. You DeltaClan cats really don't wash, do you?" he snarled, acting as if Twisterpaw hadn't even said anything.

"No, we don't wash, but we don't need to. We bathe in water." the smaller one, a paler gray tabby, raised his head to retort. His dark blue eyes were filled with a quiet determination.

"Maybe you're the one that smells weird. You ForestClan cats reek of mud and decay!" a reddish tom snapped from behind him. Brightpaw whirled around to face the slender apprentice. "Oh yeah? Well you MeadowClan cats stink of flea dung! All you do is run around in the tall grass attracting all kinds of bugs! Name one cat in your Clan who isn't infested with-" he suddenly halted as Possumpaw calmly placed herself between the two toms.

"Brightpaw, please don't insult my brother." she said evenly.

"Brother? You look nothing like them!" Brightpaw jerked his head at the two brown toms.

"No. We don't have the same father." Possumpaw informed him. The white tom tilted his head, trying to work it out. Twisterpaw paused, intrigued. Possumpaw was distracting him.

After a tense moment, Twisterpaw padded over to her brother and curled her tail over his shoulder. "Brightpaw, don't believe every rumor you hear. MeadowClan cats don't have bugs crawling in their fur." she reasoned.

"But it's true! They run around in all that grass where-" he began to argue.

"It's the middle of leaf-bare!" Twisterpaw hissed, feeling herself lose control. "There are no bugs! It's snowing, Brightpaw! The only bugs you've ever seen were moths! Honestly, how could you forget that? Have you ever seen a flea in your life?" she spat.

Brightpaw glanced around, realizing his insensitivity. "Oh. Right." he fumbled, looking down at his paws. "Sorry, Shrewpaw." he muttered as he cast a glance at the slender reddish apprentice.

"And Possumpaw. And Oriolepaw. And you two," he lashed his tail in the direction of the grayish DeltaClan apprentices. Twisterpaw shot him a look before turning to the two strange cats. Hadn't Claystar mentioned them? If so, she couldn't remember. Their leader didn't say a lot, anyways. All of the names had passed her by like snowflakes in a breeze.

"Hello there, you guys. I apologize, but I'm terrible at names and pelts. Who were you, again?" Twisterpaw tried to hide the adrenaline that resonated in her chest, hoping it didn't bleed into her voice. She stepped towards the DeltaClan cats, who were still separate from the rest of the apprentices.

"I'm Gillpaw." the pale gray tabby spoke, sitting up to gaze back at her. "This is my brother Finpaw. We've been apprentices for almost a moon now. Our mentors are Flintfade and Trouttrickle." he spoke quietly but firmly, resting his tail on his brother's spine.

The smaller tom jumped slightly, focusing on his front paws whenever Twisterpaw edged closer.

She turned back to Brightpaw, who was pawing at the ground and pretending not to notice the stares he was getting from the other apprentices.

"Well, now you know their names. Apologize to them." Twisterpaw commanded.

"No. You can't tell me what to do! Do you know who I am?" Brightpaw's voice grew louder with every word. "The apprentice of Poppystar's daughter! The future leader of ForestClan! No one tells me what to do!" He stretched to his full height, which was much bigger than Twisterpaw.

"This is a peaceful gathering. We're not supposed to be fighting." Twisterpaw felt hot anger burning in her throat. She hadn't ever yelled at her brother, really. Would she make a fool of herself in

front of all of these important cats?

Brightpaw edged closer, baring his teeth. "Again, telling me what to do. How stupid and brainless do you think I am?" he sneered.

"Brightpaw of ForestClan! You come right here this instant!" a voice suddenly broke through their argument. Sandyfur was standing tall on the metal structure, glaring at Brightpaw.

The white tom hung his head, wading through the sea of pelts. Just a few moments before, the cats were chattering away. But now, even the leaving MireClan cats paused from the edge of the clearing, curiously craning their necks to see what the silence was about.

"You sit down. You stay here. We'll be having a long talk with your mother once we get back to camp." Sandyfur's voice was deathly quiet. Without a word, Brightpaw sat down beneath the deputy, who hopped down to the lower platform on the metal structure, watching him with her fiery amber eyes full of fury.

First the cats started whispering, but after a few heartbeats they began talking again. Twisterpaw whirled around to face the apprentices once again. "I'm so sorry! I know he's annoying and sometimes aggressive, but I didn't know he'd act like that!" she said frantically.

The beautiful tortoiseshell stepped forwards, her expression unbelievably warm. "What do you mean? Thanks for keeping him in line. I'm Fernpaw, from RockClan. And before you say anything, Thistlestar is totally okay with me being here." she said smoothly.

"Wha- who's Thistlestar?" Twisterpaw sat back, still ruffled from her encounter with Brightpaw.

"The leader of RockClan." Fernpaw detailed.

"Oh. Um, what's RockClan?" the black-and-white apprentice felt stupid, but at least she was being honest.

Chapter Eleven

"Let me get this straight. You're just here with your healer-mentor to get information and bring it back to your Clan? But you aren't going to, like, represent them?" Twisterpaw was confused. Aside from all the names Fernpaw had just listed, her mind kept drifting off and nothing made sense anymore.

"Kind of. Cats are allowed to come here, but we don't have to give out any information if we don't want to." Fernpaw confirmed.

The tortoiseshell had only been talking for a few minutes, but Twisterpaw kept nodding off or admiring her beautiful pelt. She could only remember a few names that had been mentioned to her all night. Her vision kept getting black spots. Actually, they were black with tiny pink dots...

"Are you okay, Twisterpaw?" Fernpaw looked concerned.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. I've only stayed up this late one time, though." the apprentice waved her off.

"Ah, yes. I remember my first time at a gathering. It isn't like the Moonpond, where you can sleep and do the talking there. By the way, don't be surprised if the sun rises and a few of the Clans still haven't left." she warned.

Suddenly alert, Twisterpaw looked around. The clearing looked much emptier than it did when Fernpaw first introduced herself. She couldn't see any MireClan, DeltaClan, or GroveClan cats. And the MeadowClan patrol was gathering at the break in the trees.

"It looks like Poppystar is rounding us up." Twisterpaw commented, watching the leader intensely as she turned away from her deputy and nodded at Cardinalheart and Parsleyshade, who were talking to a pawful of WoodClan warriors on the far side of the island.

Lemonspice... that was the name of the dusty-yellow WoodClan she-cat, wasn't it? She had been attacked by a kittypet- no, that was her apprentice. Wasn't it?

"You go ahead. I'm just waiting on Vinetrail to quit telling her long stories so we can go home. But I'm here at every gathering, sometimes with our two elders. I can see you're not listening." Fernpaw trailed off as Twisterpaw stood up, wobbling on her paws. "See you." the black-and-white apprentice mumbled.

Black-and-red spots filled her vision as she turned around, but everything cleared as she stumbled over. Cardinalheart padded over, offering a shoulder for her to fall on. "Woah, there! It looks like someone's excited to get back home!" he said, overly cheerful.

Twisterpaw brushed off his belittling tone. "Sleep. Please." she managed, her voice muffled in his reddish fur.

"Come on, ForestClan!" Parsleyshade called a few moments later. Twisterpaw broke away from Cardinalheart, groaning deeply. It was difficult enough to stay awake at a gathering, but the hard part was making it back through the snowstorm.

That night, the apprentice dreamed of strange cats chasing her through a snowy forest as the sharp pebbles tore through her paw pads. When she finally awoke, orange light was illuminating the den. Twisterpaw shuffled closer to Magpiepaw, who was the only other apprentice in the den. The smaller she-cat curled in tighter, burying her face in her sister's fur. Twisterpaw felt the urge to fall asleep again, but she shook it off. She had things to do.

She stood up and stretched, feeling refreshed. At the gathering, she had stayed up way too late- but now, as she tried to remember the fuzzy details, everything felt trapped in stone. She only remembered a pawful of names. Sequoiastar and Hazelshade of WoodClan. Sedgestar of MireClan. And that pale tom from MeadowClan whose deputy was having his kits...

Twisterpaw stepped into the sunset, scanning the camp as she searched for Crowpelt. He was sitting on one of the smooth boulders outside of the elder's den, asleep. She bounced over and

tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, Crowpelt! Are we doing anything tonight? Can I go on a moonhigh patrol?" she prodded him enthusiastically.

"No." he grumbled.

"But why not?" she pleaded.

Crowpelt opened a pale blue eye. "Young apprentices aren't allowed on moonhigh patrols. It's a lot more dangerous than during the day." he said apathetically. "So, no."

Twisterpaw stared down at her paws in frustration, but noticed a shadow creeping up behind her. She peered over her shoulder to see Dovetail and Cardinalheart walking towards them, their tails twined together.

"Sparrowkit and Finchkit are bound to become apprentices anytime soon. We're going on the dusk patrol to get back in the habit. Would you like to join us?" Cardinalheart offered warmly.

"Sure!" Twisterpaw felt a new wave of energy. "Is Crowpelt coming?"

Cardinalheart eyed the dark tom. "I don't see why not. And I think Poppystar is about to make new rules about apprentices going on patrols without their mentors..."

Crowpelt lifted his head. "Alright, fine. I'll go. But only because it's been a few days since I went on a patrol with her. Which I've done at least four times, though..." he rumbled on as he sat up slowly, shaking his head. "Hunting or border patrol?" he said, more clearly.

"It's a hunting patrol. But Twisterpaw, aren't you hungry? You haven't eaten since last evening." Dovetail turned to the apprentice, giving her a knowing nod of the head. "Go get something from the prey-bush. Oh, and Poppystar wanted you two to go on this patrol, but please report to her den at moonrise, or whenever you get back." her voice grew more firm as she concluded.

"Yes, of course." Twisterpaw dipped her head to the queen and warrior as she trotted over the the prey-bush. She picked out a

chipmunk and sat down to eat it. She glanced up now and then to watch Sandyfur on the deputy's rock, pointing to a few of the cats gathered below her. Who was going on the patrol- Her, Crowpelt, Dovetail, Cardinalheart, Sandyfur and her daughter Daisypaw, and who was that spiky-furred reddish tom? One of the senior warriors, no doubt.

Her mind wandered to the night before, trying desperately to remember all of the names. There was Lemmingpaw, the fuzzy dark brown she-cat from GroveClan. Her brother Adderpaw. Possumpaw, the pale gray tabby she-cat from MeadowClan. One of her brothers was a reddish tom named Shrewpaw. Oriolepaw was that ginger tabby. And there were the two newest DeltaClan apprentices, Finpaw and Gillpaw. Oh, and the RockClan healer, Fernpaw.

"What're you thinking about?" Daisypaw broke through her mental rambling.

"Oh. Just the cats I saw at the gathering." Twisterpaw shuffled back, making room for the cream-colored she-cat. "Sit down! Have you ever been to a gathering?" she invited.

Daisypaw settled right next to her, too close but not enough that Twisterpaw wanted her to move. She tilted her head, narrowing her amber eyes. "Obviously I've been to a few gatherings. But not recently. It's cool, but I don't think the other apprentices like me." she recalled. "Which ones did you meet?"

"I saw Lemmingpaw and Adderpaw. And I met their parents." Twisterpaw shrugged. "Plus, I talked to Fernpaw. And there's two new DeltaClan apprentices, Gillpaw and Finpaw." she informed Daisypaw.

"Did you see Saffronpaw?" the she-cat perked her ears up.

"No, he became a warrior." Twisterpaw shook her head.

"Oh. That's nice. Well, nice talking to you." Daisypaw spontaneously stood up and walked away towards her mother, who was still perched on the boulder, talking to some senior warriors.

Twisterpaw stared at the apprentice across the camp. Had she just talked to her... only to get information about Saffronsmolder? She shook her head and examined the remains of the chipmunk. Only its tail had meat in it now. She gnawed at it, trying to savor every last bite before the patrol could leave.

"Come on, Twisterpaw! We're not going to wait all evening!" the spiky-furred reddish tom called out to her from below the deputy's rock. He sounded cheerful yet sarcastic at the same time. Twisterpaw jumped to her paws, racing over to join the patrol. She was excited- she hadn't caught any prey since she caught that robin as a kit! What would she catch next?

Chapter Twelve

"No."

"But why not? I promise I'll only dip my toes in!" Twisterpaw pleaded with her mentor.

"You're not going in the lake." the dark tom said flatly.

The black-and-white apprentice fought down her frustration and turned away from were she had been admiring the view of the rising moon. "So, what now?" she asked.

Crowpelt shrugged. "We gather some clouds, I guess. What do you think? It's a hunting patrol. We go into the forest and hunt." he snapped.

"Well, I can see you clearly want to be left alone." Twisterpaw held her head high as she trotted back into the forest. When she glanced back, Crowpelt wasn't even looking at her. He was staring out at... what were those territories? There was the tall trees of WoodClan, the grassland of MeadowClan, and those islands were DeltaClan, right? At least she had learned something.

Twisterpaw hunched her shoulders against the cold as she wove through the bushes. She could smell the directions the other cats went. The apprentice circled around for a moment before heading towards the WoodClan border. Surely there were some birds there, right?

This was one of the few times she had been alone in the dense forest. She breathed in the wonderful scents as she enjoyed the silence and the sweet smell of decaying leaves.

After a while of walking, a bird chirping brought her out of her thoughts. A mockingbird was singing from atop a berry bush,

guarding it fiercely. Twisterpaw crouched down immediately when she spotted it on one of the highest branches. It was very high up, but if she could get underneath it, she could make the pounce.

The she-cat inched closer, silently creeping around a tree to get a closer look. The bird wasn't facing her, instead spewing its song in the general direction of WoodClan. Twisterpaw slowly padded forwards until she was directly underneath her prey.

At the last moment, the mockingbird hopped around to face her. It immediately saw the cat, letting out a shrill shriek of alarm. Not wasting an opportunity, Twisterpaw pounced just as it lifted off from its perch. She narrowly missed it and came crashing down to the ground with a few feathers fluttering from between her toes. "Rats!" she snarled, shaking off the feathers of her failed catch.

"You need to work on you follow-through. You had the pounce, and it was quite impressive. But the landing could have been a lot better." Crowpelt stepped out of the shadows, eyeing her coldly. "But that was good."

"Crowpelt- you were watching me?" Twisterpaw felt embarrassed as she picked out the gray and white tufts from her claws.

"Yes. How else am I supposed to criticize you?" the dark tom said plainly.

"Oh. Thanks, I guess." Twisterpaw felt warm inside. Her mentor was complimenting her!

"Maybe I could... teach you how to pounce sometime? I mean, you have the stalking part down pretty good. But a little practice could do wonders. You'll see." he sounded positive, for once.

"Hello? Crowpelt? Twisterpaw?" a voice called out through the moonlit forest, interrupting Crowpelt's rare display of affection.

"Over here!" he yowled.

A few moments later, the spiky-furred reddish tom materialized from the dead leaves. "There you are! I hope I didn't scare off any prey. We're heading back, though." he reported.

"Thanks, Pinebristle. We'll be right there." Crowpelt nodded at the tom.

Oh, so that was his name. Pinebristle. Twisterpaw never would have guessed.

"Poppystar? Are you in there?" Twisterpaw mumbled around the chickadee she was carrying.

"Yes, I'm here." the leader called from inside the den.

Twisterpaw ducked under the tree roots and stepped into the ForestClan leader's den. "Hello, Poppystar. You wanted to see me?" it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light, but she soon spotted the orange tabby sitting just outside her nest. Her yellow eyes gleamed back at her.

"Please, sit with me." the tabby waved a paw at the smooth dirt beside her.

The apprentice nodded, circling around before plopping down on the damp floor. "Am I in trouble?" she managed, nearly dropping her chickadee.

"Oh, no. Quite the opposite." the leader twitched her whiskers forwards. "You can put that bird down, by the way."

The apprentice placed the chickadee at the edge of the nest before sitting down again, embarrassed she didn't put it down the moment she walked in.

"Did you get a good night's rest, Twisterpaw? You seemed quite tired on the way back last night." Poppystar said openly.

"I had weird dreams all night. But yes, I guess I did sleep well!" the black-and-white she-cat laughed.

"It would be rude of me to not acknowledge your accomplishments at the gathering. Your brother needed to learn how to speak to other cats without being disrespectful, and we gave him a chance. But when Crowpelt requested you go to keep him in line, I knew you had what it takes." the leader nodded her head at the

apprentice.

"But I may have underestimated the strain of a gathering on a young apprentice. Brightpaw started a fight, and you were practically falling asleep on the way back. I understand if you don't want to go to the next gathering." she tilted her head. "You don't have to go."

"But I liked the gathering!" Twisterpaw felt hot under her fur, even though the wet cold was seeping up her spine. "I met some really cool cats there! I want to be there!" Was her leader asking her to not attend gatherings? Was she banned? Did she make a bad impression on the other Clans?

Poppystar chuckled. "Ah, yes. Pikastar and Tawnyhawk told me about meeting you. And I don't mean I'm banning you from going. I called you here to tell you that Brightpaw has been suspended from gatherings until all of the snow in the valley has melted."

Twisterpaw sat back. "Suspended? But I'm still going?" she was stunned.

"Your brother needs to learn respect for the other Clans. But there's no point in punishing you for his outbursts. It was unfair of me to expect perfect behavior from both of you. I'm sorry for that." Poppystar's expression softened. "But you're always welcome to come. I think it would be a great idea for you to bring Magpiepaw to the next gathering."

Twisterpaw shot to her feet. "Really? Me and Magpeipaw are going to the next gathering?" she practically squealed.

Poppystar granted a small smile. "Only if you want to, of course."

"What did Poppystar want?" Brightpaw was sitting by the apprentice den, no doubt waiting for her. "How big is her nest? And is the leader's den actually cold and wet?" he pried.

"It is... kind of damp. And slightly cooler than outside. But it's really big. Why do you want to know?" Twisterpaw sat down beside him. "Because you're going to be in there one day?" she guessed.

"Well yeah. Why else?" Brightpaw rolled his eyes. "Why else would Poppystar make me the apprentice of her daughter? Because she's old and obviously wants me to take over one day!"

"You know the rules. You need to have mentored at least one apprentice before becoming deputy. And that's a lot of work, organizing patrols and charging into battles." Twisterpaw reasoned.

"But I can handle that! As soon as Snowspirit lets me get any battle training..." Brightpaw unsheathed his claws. "I'll be the best deputy ever. No-one will mess with me! And then I'll get my gift from SpiritClan and be the best leader there ever was, in all of ForestClan! No, all the Clans!" the white tom stared up at the cloudy night sky, his voice echoing around the camp.

From across the clearing, Mothtail raised her head from her meal and glared at Brightpaw. He shrugged and swiveled his head to look at Twisterpaw.

"I'm gonna live a thousand moons! All of the leaders will bow to me! So what if I push some cats out of my way? We'll be so happy once everyone stops whispering and starts bowing down to us!" he whispered enthusiastically.

"We? Us?" Twisterpaw echoed.

"Well, yeah. Obviously the four of us are destined for greatness, right? I'll be the best leader that ever lived. Galepaw will be the best healer to ever heal. Magpiepaw can do whatever she wants without anyone picking on her. And you'll be the greatest deputy that ever was." he grinned.

Twisterpaw shook her head. "I don't know about being deputy. I wouldn't want to boss around cats all day and night..."

"But you'll be by my side, right?" Brightpaw's yellow eyes shone in the light of the almost-full moon.

Twisterpaw sighed deeply, feeling all of her anger dissolve in love for her well-meaning brother.

"Of course. I'll be right by your side." she promised.

Chapter Thirteen

Twisterpaw unsheathed her claws, digging them into Mousepaw's exposed underbelly. The large tom gave a squeak of surprise and leaped off of her. "Hey! No claws, remember?" he protested, arching his back and hissing.

The black-and-white she-cat stood up hesitantly. "Oh. Sorry. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I told you to stop relying on your weight and size! That isn't going to save you from someone's teeth and claws!" his mentor Sprucefall critiqued from the edge of the sandy hollow. "You need to pull together your combat skills before your assessment. You'll be fighting Pinebristle, remember? How is throwing around your weight going to save you from him?"

"Sorry, Sprucefall. I'll work on it." Mousepaw hung his head, apparently ashamed.

"Don't be sorry. Fix it. Go fight with your sister." Sprucefall ordered bluntly. "Then you'll see how important your balance is."

His apprentice nodded obediently. "Of course, sir. Right away." he promised.

Twisterpaw offered him a small smile before turning to her two siblings, who were also instructed to at least watch a fighting lesson.

"That's right! You send them running, Twisterpaw!" Brightpaw cheered enthusiastically. Twisterpaw shrugged him off, rolling her eyes. Her brother was, truly, too much.

"I wish I could do that. Can't I fight, Mother?" Magpiepaw craned her neck back to look up at Snowspirit, who was hovering over her shoulder.

"No, Magpiepaw. You aren't strong enough." Snowspirit said gently, yet her blue eyes were filled with worry as she eyed Twisterpaw. "Fighting is too rough for you. At least, while you're this young," she added, noticing the look Parsleyshade was giving her.

"It wasn't honorable, but technically you defeated him." Crowpelt's voice was cold, but Twisterpaw beamed at her mentor anyways.

"That was short. Maybe she should go up against another apprentice. We didn't get to see much... you know. Combat." Parsleyshade suggested.

Twisterpaw turned around in the half-frozen sand, watching as Mousepaw and Squirrelpaw fought under the eyes of their mentors watching them. They yelled out suggestions from a fallen log at the opposite end of the hollow.

"Stop pausing! Don't let her know your next move!" Sprucefall bellowed.

"Faster! Use all four of your paws!" Robinsong commanded.

"Get on the ground!"

"Don't let him pin you! Spin around!"

"What are you doing? Just pounce already!"

The two chased each other around for a moment, but Squirrelpaw quickly tripped her brother with her long tail. The large tom clumsily crashed to the ground, pinned by the dusky ginger she-cat. "That was quick, Mousepaw! Have you finally accepted that you'll never beat me?" she snarled victoriously.

"All right, you've made your point. Now get off me!" the pale tabby whined, kicking out at his sister with his back legs. Squirrelpaw slowly stepped off, reveling in her brother's humiliation.

"How lonely you'll be tonight- sleeping in the apprentices' den once again, licking your wounds! I'll visit you, though. I'm sure you'll want to hear all about how fun it is to defeat Sandyfur in a fight!" she barked. Mousepaw sat up and licked his tail, ignoring her cruel

remarks.

The ginger she-cat's face twisted into a scowl, further confirming the fruitlessness of her comments. "Stupid, lazy worm. Did you even hear what I just said?" she stamped a front paw into the wet sand for emphasis.

"Squirrelpaw! Get over here!" her mentor Robinsong snapped from her place on the log.

Squirrelpaw obediently trotted over to the reddish-orange warrior. "Yeah?" she grunted.

"You've got a new opponent. Go easy on her." Robinsong commanded.

Squirrelpaw whirled around, amber eyes blazing. "Who is it? Who's my next victim- I mean, opponent?"

"I believe you've met Twisterpaw, haven't you?" Parsleyshade stepped towards the she-cat. "Since it's her first time in battle training, we need a more experienced fighter to give her a taste of paw-to-paw combat." the ginger tabby explained brightly.

Squirrelpaw faced the young apprentice. "Oh, really? I'm fighting *her*?" she growled. Her amber eyes narrowed as she drew back her head, examining the black-and-white she-cat. "This will be easy."

"Remember to go easy on her. Give Twisterpaw a chance." Crowpelt reminded her.

Would Squirrelpaw go easy on her, or would she show off? Twisterpaw studied the older apprentice as the larger she-cat shook the sand from her dusky ginger pelt. "All right, let's do this. Try not to die, Twisterpaw." she spat.

"You can do this! I believe in you!" Brightpaw crowed. Parsleyshade thwacked him with her fluffy tail. "Don't distract your sister, Brightpaw. Let her focus." she scolded, motioning for him to scoot back.

Just as Twisterpaw was turning her attention back to her opponent,

a furry red mass smothered her. She fell backwards, caught off guard. "Mmf!" she squawked, trying to push back at Squirrelpaw's dense reddish pelt. It didn't budge. She was trapped beneath the almost-warrior.

Twisterpaw rolled over a few times, managing to squeeze out of Squirrelpaw's grip. She jumped to the side and crouched low to the ground, staring intensely at the larger apprentice. "That's not fair! I wasn't ready!" she protested. Squirrelpaw leaped at her again, but Twisterpaw pressed herself into the sand as the she-cat soared over her head.

Thinking fast, she turned around just as Squirrelpaw landed neatly in the sand and turned to spring at her, all in one fluid motion. Twisterpaw reared up and wrapped her paws around her opponent's muzzle. Confused, Squirrelpaw skidded to a halt and tried to shake off the smaller apprentice, hissing wildly.

After a brief struggle, Twisterpaw ended up clinging to her shoulders with her rear legs and tail dangling over Squirrelpaw's face. The ginger she-cat thrashed around for a few moments, then flopped over. The black-and-white apprentice was one step ahead, planting both paws on the bigger cat's neck as she flopped to the ground. Twisterpaw dragged herself up to her full height, staring back at Squirrelpaw's shocked amber eyes. She had been pinned.

"Wha- how-" the ginger she-cat panted.

Twisterpaw was stunned too. "I don't know either." she managed.

"That was awesome!" Brightpaw rushed over to congratulate his sister.

"Thanks!" Twisterpaw hopped down from her perch on Squirrelpaw's chest and stood up tall. "There's a lot more where that came from!" she boasted, although her heart was practically vibrating and the rush of blood in her ears was deafening.

"Do I have to do that?" Magpiepaw's wide eyes stared sorrowfully at Squirrelpaw, who was pacing around and muttering.

Snowspirit curled her tail around the small apprentice. "No, never like that." she eyed Twisterpaw with an unreadable expession. Whatever it was, it was far from pride.

"Thank you for that wonderful display of skill, Twisterpaw!" Parsleyshade purred.

"That was... actually not terrible," Crowpelt nodded in acknowledgement.

Her siblings and mentor were praising her, but Twisterpaw couldn't help but focus her ears on Robinsong's sharp voice. The bitter warrior was yelling at Squirrelpaw, who lowered her head and swished her tail irritably. Her orange-ish mentor angrily marched away, with the apprentice reluctantly trailing behind her.

Twisterpaw drew her attention back to her brother. Brightpaw gave her a thorough nudge of the shoulder. "You're pretty good at this, Twisterpaw! Almost as good as me!" he grinned.

"How about you two try it?" Parsleyshade suggested.

"Oh, no. Not those two." Snowspirit said bluntly from the edge of the sand.

"Why not?" Parsleyshade's voice held a slight edge of kittishness as she confronted their mother. Crowpelt scooted closer to the white she-cat, shaking his head gravely. "Don't you remember what Shadowsweep said? About Brightpaw fighting with his sisters?" he warned.

"What did Shadowsweep say about me?" Brightpaw piped up.

"Oh, nothing." Crowpelt grew quiet once more.

"And which sister should he not fight- and why?" Twisterpaw demanded.

"Both. You might hurt each other, what with your anger issues. And poor Magpiepaw is too fragile for that kind of combat!" Snowspirit said sharply, lashing her tail passionately.

Brightpaw turned to Twisterpaw, the hint of a smile giving him away. "She's right, Twisterpaw. You need to work on your anger issues." he joked.

Twisterpaw drew a paw to her chest. "What anger issues? You were the one who got in that fight at the last gathering!" she retorted.

"That was, like, a half-moon ago!" Brightpaw flared indignantly.

"See what I mean about anger issues?" Snowspirit waved a paw at the two siblings. "They're completely out of control!"

Twisterpaw flattened her ears defensively, resisting the urge to say something against her mother. But of course she wouldn't. She never lashed out a her loved ones. She had nothing against them.

...Right?

Chapter Fourteen

"Squirrelpaw, from now on your name will be Squirrelstrike. ForestClan honors you for your agility and excellent combat skills." Poppystar's voice was calm and quiet, but it sparked many joyous yowls from nearly every cat in the Clan.

Squirrelstrike glanced around, showing no acknowledgement of the cats cheering her new name.

"This evening, her brother Mousepaw also attempted a combat assessment. He did not pass, but since he performed well on our moonlight hunting patrol, he will also receive his warrior name." Poppystar announced.

Mousepaw stood up, his pale green eyes absolutely shining in the clear night.

"From now on, your name will be Mousefall. ForestClan honors you for your charisma and resemblance to your mentor." the leader proposed.

Mousefall grinned kittishly at the cats around him. The chants of his name were fewer than Squirrelstrike's, but he looked exponentially more grateful. Twisterpaw leaned back her head to yowl his name louder than ever. It was the least she could do for her friend.

On the leader's branch, Poppystar swished her tail patiently as she waited for the crowd to settle down. "We also have a new healer. As many of you may already know, my son Sagepaw became a full healer under the half-moon tonight. ForestClan recognizes Sagepool for his determination and dedication." she said, gazing lovingly at her son.

Galepaw was the one screeching out a name this time. It wasn't that noticeable, though, since every single member of the Clan

cheered loudly for the new healer. Twisterpaw too, even though she hadn't had a real conversation with the former apprentice, who was always at work on some task. Maybe he was shy. Or perhaps he had sacrificed his social life to perfect his skills. But she still shouted his name out of respect, even though Sagepool only showed a slight smile in response to all the attention he was getting.

"We also have some new apprentices." Poppystar pricked her ears towards Sparrowkit and Finchkit, who were at the very front of the crowd. The two brothers were practically vibrating with excitement.

"Finchkit and Sparrowkit, you have reached the age of which I shall guide you into your roles in ForestClan." Poppystar began. "Finchkit, you shall now be named Finchpaw. Your mentor will be Cardinalheart."

Finchpaw and Cardinalheart collided clumsily, but laughed it off. They were clearly a perfect match. Finchpaw beamed up at Cardinalheart and bounced on his toes as the Clan called out his new name.

"And Sparrowkit, you shall now be named Sparrowpaw. I will be your mentor." the leader slid down the tree trunk to touch noses with the nervous kit, who hesitated considerably. The elderly tabby gave him a warm grin. "It's alright, little one. I don't bite." she promised.

"This gathering is dismissed. Not that I can't make it back up the tree. I just don't have any more announcements." Poppystar joked.

"I can't believe this! That puny little kit got apprenticed to the leader of ForestClan!" Brightpaw roared, lashing out at the tree once again. "This is humiliating. I should be at her command, not that nervous wreck!" he snarled furiously.

"It's for the best, Brightpaw. Poppystar made Parsleyshade your mentor because you two have similar personalities. Sparrowpaw is the nervous one, so Poppystar is the best choice of mentor for him." Twisterpaw explained from a safe distance.

"But why not Dovetail? Or one of those creaky old senior

warriors?" the white tom whined.

"They always seem one day away from retiring. Who would give one of them an apprentice as energetic as those two? Poppystar made the right choice. She doesn't think you aren't worthy of an impressive mentor, Brightpaw. She's just not the right match for you." Twisterpaw was telling the truth, at least. It was clear as daylight, but her brother just reared up and slashed at the tree again.

"Poppystar was an elder when she became leader. And her special gift *clearly* isn't eternal youth. It just ...doesn't make sense why he would be chosen over me. I'm great, right?" he stared at his sister hopefully.

"Everyone knows you're *so fun* to be around." Twisterpaw said sarcatically, waving her tail at the tree her brother was busy shredding.

"What's going on over here?" Parsleyshade padded through the bushes and made a face at Brightpaw when she saw him with his claws still embedded in bark. "Oh. You're taking out your anger. I never thought I would say this, but please clean up this tree." she half-giggled.

Brightpaw bitterly glanced around at the puddle of wood shavings he was standing in. "Alright, fine. But don't leave without me." he grumbled, sweeping them into a pile with his tail.

"I wasn't planning on leaving you unattended near kittypet territory." Parsleyshade joked.

Twisterpaw stepped into the grass that separated the forest from the wall of rock. The rest of the patrol was gathered loosely by the gray stone. Finchpaw was craning his neck to see above the cliff. "There's something up there! What's all that wood?" he asked fiercely.

Cardinalheart chuckled. "Those are fences. Beyond that..." he began to explain, but Twisterpaw wasn't paying attention. She had now patrolled this border many times and knew it well, but had never

really inspected the fence. She drifted away from the rest of the patrol as she ambled ahead, examining each of the fences.

Some were made of solid wood, while others had patterns. Most of them were dark, but others were pale. As the apprentice walked, she could just barely see the tips of the fences over the rocks. But in places where the wall receded, they were in clear view.

At the WoodClan border, Twisterpaw noticed that there was something unusual up ahead. She looked around nervously before she decided to investigate, flattening herself into the wall as she tried to avoid setting her paws on any definite WoodClan territory.

Sure enough, there was a channel running through the rock. It was smooth, and had clearly guided water downhill recently. It was almost vertical, leading to a hole in a pale fence. Twisterpaw reached out to touch it with a paw. It was slick and wet to the touch.

Suddenly, the apprentice froze as her ears picked up voices- but not familiar ones. She focused hard before spotting a border patrol walking along the ForestClan border. If she ran back now, they would obviously see her. And considering how Brightpaw caused some tensions...

She did not need to be seen on their territory.

Thinking fast, Twisterpaw made a huge leap, almost straight upwards. Her paws slammed down on the smooth surface, catching on the highest of the horizontal lines that were scored into the stone. She hung there for a desperate moment, then surged upwards once more to reach just inside the fence. One of her paws slid off of the wet stone, leaving her to scramble desperately with her hind legs as the claws on her secured paw gripped the wood tightly.

She could smell the cats now, and a few moments later they stepped out of the forest. Twisterpaw forced her head through the hole in a last attempt to keep herself from sliding down the channel.

Just as she was about to fall off, she heard a jingling noise and

snapped her head towards the sound. A young tabby she-cat was running towards her. "Hold on! I'm coming!" she yowled.

Twisterpaw instinctively pulled her head back to hiss at the strange cat, but lost her grip. She had fallen only a paw-length when the tabby locked her jaws around her scruff and pulled her through the hole with surprising strength.

"Hey, Pearl! What are you doing back there?" the kittypet said cheerfully. Her expression completely changed when she stood back. "Wait. You're not Pearl. What are you doing in my yard?" her pale green eyes widened in fear. "You're a Clan cat, aren't you? Please don't hurt me!" she cowered comically low to the ground, her voice rising.

Twisterpaw held up a paw. "I'm not attacking or anything." she assured her. The fluffy tabby just stared at the ground and hissed.

Giving up, the apprentice turned back to the hole in the fence. The dawn patrol had passed by, but the dusty yellow warrior was lingering behind her Clanmates, glaring up at the fence. Lemonspice, was it? Her apprentice had been attacked by a kittypet. One that fit this exact description. The dusty warrior clawed a tree before wandering off to catch up with her Clanmates.

Twisterpaw turned back to the terrified she-cat, who was watching her with eyes as big as eggs.

"What are you doing here? Are you going to ask me questions and scratch me?" the kitten accused.

"No. I'm not from that Clan. I'm from ForestClan, the one in... that direction." Twisterpaw waved her tail in the general direction of the territory. "I'm Twisterpaw, by the way. What's your name?"

"I'm Pumpkin. And... there's more than one Clan?" the ginger she-kit raised her head, curious. "Why don't you come inside and explain it? Mango has been asking me so many questions ever since I got attacked while hunting in the forest. I don't know anything about the wildcats. Could you stay and talk about it?" she seemed hopeful, talking excitedly at the black-and-white she-cat.

"Oh, no. I've got things to do. I'm currently on a patrol, actually." Twisterpaw turned back towards the hole in the fence.

"A what? And I can wait, if you want. I have all day!" Pumpkin stood up excitedly.

"Oh. It's against the rules for me to hang out with a kittypet." Twisterpaw admitted.

"But please! I tried to ask the mean cats what they were talking about and they just... they just laughed at me!" the kitten looked so broken that Twisterpaw just had to take pity on her.

"Oh, alright. I'll come back here at sunset to talk. But don't tell anyone about it." she said reluctantly.

"Great! I'll see you!" Pumpkin perked up.

Twisterpaw slid down the channel and began walking back to her territory, making sure to stay close to the cliff. She glanced over her shoulder to see the ginger kit staring back at her, a giant smile illuminating her face.

I'm not breaking the rules, am I? This little kit just wants to know why WoodClan attacked her. I'll just give her the basics and be on my way. No one has to know about me making plans with a kittypet, she thought to herself.

But it's best if no-one knows. Just to be safe.

Chapter Fifteen

"Where were you? We've been waiting!" Parsleyshade called from downhill.

"Oh, sorry. I thought I smelled a kittypet by the border." Twisterpaw repeated the line she had rehearsed twice on the walk back. She climbed down a sand dune to join the rest of the patrol, trotting over the smooth sand to sit down next to her brother. Parsleyshade and Cardinalheart were stretched out on the smooth boulders by the beach, watching as Finchpaw played with the sand.

Finchpaw suddenly looked up at the two warriors. "Can we go in the water?" he requested.

"Unfortunately, Lilypaw and Daisypaw are the only apprentices allowed in the water right now. They can swim, but you can't." Cardinalheart said, shaking his head. "You can lay on these rocks with us while we wait to meet with the other border patrol. This is fun, right?" he scooted over, but his son just turned back to the shore. "Can I at least put my paws in?"the reddish apprentice begged.

Parsleyshade gave Cardinalheart a playful nudge. "Let him do it, you stickler. He's not going to drown if he only gets his paws wet. Not to mention..." she narrowed her eyes at Twisterpaw and Brightpaw, who were still sitting on the smooth sand.

"You don't know how to swim, do you?" Parsleyshade asked.

"No, but I think it would be fun to get in the lake." Twisterpaw suggested.

Brightpaw gave her a look. "Not me! The water's way too cold!" he complained.

"How do you know that?" his sister retorted.

"Alright, then. Finchpaw, you can dip your paws in. As for you two, stick to the shallows. And give us a yowl if you start drowning." Cardinalheart instructed.

Twisterpaw gave her brother a playful shove. "Come on! Last one in is a rotten egg!"

She dashed away, leaping into the waves. The water was up to her chest, and a lot colder than she had anticipated, but it was fun. She kicked off the sandy floor but no matter how she thrashed around, she couldn't swim. The black-and-white apprentice splashed around in frustration for a while.

Finally, after many attempts, she figured out how to push away from the lake floor to propel herself through the water. She triumphantly looked back at her brother, only to see him sitting lazily on the shore. She paddled closer, flattening her ears in annoyance.

"Brightpaw! What are you doing?" Twisterpaw snapped at the white tom. "Come in! It's not that cold, I swear!"

"Oh, no. I'm much too dignified for that." Brightpaw rolled his eyes.

"Well, if you're going to miss out on swimming, then at least watch Finchpaw for Cardinalheart, would you?" she nodded at the reddish warrior, who was snoozing peacefully on the smooth boulder while Parsleyshade slumbered lightly beside him, still sitting upright.

"I know. They told me to keep an eye on him. But he's right over there." Brightpaw snorted, swiveling his head around. "Uh... where is he?"

Twisterpaw's eyes widened. "You weren't keeping track of him?" she gasped.

"I'm sure it's fine. He probably found an interesting shell or something." Brightpaw shrugged.

Twisterpaw stood on her hind legs, trying to see above the waves. "Finchpaw!" she yowled.

"Over here!" a tiny voice responded. Twisterpaw spotted the small apprentice adrift on a branch. "Finchpaw, hang on!" she wailed, thrashing towards the branch. It was sinking rapidly, with Finchpaw letting out a squeal every time his tail dipped into the water.

Twisterpaw kicked off the bottom of the lake as she ventured beyond the shallows, using her paws and tail to propel her forwards. The water was almost painful to swim through, the cold spawning odd prickling sensations between her toes. She grabbed the branch in her jaws and dragged it back to the shore, towing a wide-eyed Fichpaw with her.

Cardinalheart surged forwards as she climbed out of the water. "Finchpaw! What were you doing all the way out there? Why didn't you stay in the shallows?" he scolded as he sniffed his son thoroughly.

"But I did! I climbed on a branch but then the water carried it away!" the reddish tom protested.

Parsleyshade turned to Brightpaw, her eyes full of fury. "Seriously? You were supposed to be watching Finchpaw for us, and he nearly drowned!" she spat.

"But it's fine now. Twisterpaw fetched him." Brightpaw shrugged once again, thrusting his tail towards his shivering sister. "I don't see the problem."

Cardinalheart let out a low growl. "You can't expect Twisterpaw to fix all of the problems you cause! This is being reported straight to Poppystar. You'll be lucky if you ever become a warrior."

Brightpaw's head shot up. "What?"

"Is everything all right over here?" Sandyfur appeared over a dune, her ears pricked towards the cats. "I'm hearing a lot of fighting." The rest of her patrol followed her over the dune as she edged closer, her expression one of pure concern.

Twisterpaw stepped towards the deputy, dipping her head. "It's all

good now. Finchpaw nearly floated off, though." she informed her. Daisypaw leaped to her mentor's side, her eyes widening as she took in the situation. "What happened here? Why is everyone so upset?" the cream-colored apprentice wondered, half to herself.

"Is that Finchpaw? Why is he on the ground like that?" Pinebristle asked suspiciously.

"What happened to Finchpaw?" Sparrowpaw peeked his head over the dune.

"Is everyone alright?" Poppystar followed, more slowly.

Twisterpaw turned back to the arguing cats, who were mostly yelling at Brightpaw. The she-cat stepped over to join in, but was cut off when Parsleyshade stepped forwards to give her apprentice a grave warning, motioning her tail for silence. "You've crossed the line this time with your recklessness." she said, unusually bitter. "I've given you plenty of chances to prove you're a responsible and mature cat, but no. You clearly aren't ready. You're going back to the nursery."

"No. You wouldn't," Brightpaw breathed. He glanced around frantically before he desperately locked eyes with Twisterpaw.

The black-and-white she-cat said nothing, but lowered her gaze to stare at her paws. Of course, she wanted to defend her brother. But at the same time, he was too irresponsible to go unpunished. She blinked a few times at the ground before nodding silently.

"Why is Brightpaw being sent back to the nursery?" Poppystar didn't sound surprised.

"He was supposed to be watching Finchpaw, but he nearly drowned!" Parsleyshade recounted.

"It wasn't like that! He wasn't even in the water. He was just floating away. It wasn't even sinking that fast!" Brightpaw wailed.

Poppystar held up a paw, silencing the white tom before she leaped onto the highest point of the sand dune. "This isn't a Clan meeting, but it's close enough, what with two border patrols." she began.

Sandyfur sat down dutifully on one of the smooth boulders Cardinalheart and Parsleyshade had been sleeping on. She shot a venomous glare at Brightpaw when he began to mutter. "Quiet, you!" she said harshly. The white tom finally admitted defeat, his head hanging low under the stares of his Clanmates.

"Brightpaw, due to your recent actions, you have given up your right to train as a ForestClan apprentice. From now until Mothtail and Pinebristle's kits become apprentices, you will be known as Brightkit." Poppystar announced.

Brightkit lifted his head in shock. "Wha- that's more than two moons away!" he whined.

"The sooner you start showing responsibility, the sooner your punishment will be lifted." Poppystar granted. "This meeting is dismissed."

The cats slowly trailed back over the dunes and into the forest beyond, but Twisterpaw lingered by her brother, who sat hunched over in the wet sand.

"Don't worry, Brightp- I mean, Brightkit. Two moons isn't that long. It'll go by so fast." she tried to reassure him, placing her tail on one of his front paws. He didn't shove her off or snap something at her. Instead he slowly raised his head, tears in his eyes.

"You said you'd be by my side. But all you did was watch while they banished me to the nursery!" he growled half-heartedly.

"Yes... I did. But I *am* by your side. I'll help you achieve your goals. In a healthy and realistic way." for once, Twisterpaw wasn't internally wrestling with the impulse to yell some sense into the fuzzbrain. "We can do it. Together." she promised.

"But don't you want to rule the forest?" Brightpaw sniffed miserably. "We would be so happy."

"Of course I want power! But not from brute force. You just need to... minimize." she said cautiously. "Take it one step at a time. You'll get there."

Brightkit didn't say anything for a long moment, but then he lifted his head again. "No one asked you to babysit me, you know." he growled softly.

"What?"

"I don't need you telling me what to do! I don't need anyone!" Brightkit pushed himself to his paws and marched away. "I'll show you. I can make my dreams come true." the tom paused at the apex of the sand dune, looking back. "With or without you." he added.

Now she felt it. The hot anger that bubbled up, gripping her throat with merciless claws. She felt every muscle in her body tense up as she forced herself to follow her brother back into the forest without a word. She would show him. She would show her brother that being a warrior takes hard work- Brightpaw's worst enemy.

Updated Allegiances- Act Two

After every fifteen chapters or so, I will provide updated allegiances.

ForestClan:

Leader: Poppystar- An orange tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

(Apprentice: Sparrowpaw)

Deputy: Sandyfur- Cream-and-light-brown she-cat with fiery amber eyes.

(Apprentice: Daisypaw)

Healers:

Shadowsweep- Black-and-white she-cat, pale blue eyes

(Apprentice: Galepaw)

Ravenflight- Tall, dark gray tom with white paws and muzzle, orange eyes

Sagepool- Cream-colored tom with with darker paws and tail, pale green eyes

Warriors:

Sprucefall- Light brown tom, deep golden eyes

Cedarspike- Light-brown-and-white tom, orange eyes

Pinebristle- Reddish-brown striped tom, amber eyes

Crowpelt- Tall, dark gray tom with a white-tipped tail and muzzle streak with pale blue eyes.

(Apprentice: Twisterpaw)

Snowspirit- Fluffy white she-cat with blue eyes

(Apprentice: Magpiepaw)

Cardinalheart- Reddish brown tom, golden eyes.

(Apprentice: Finchpaw)

Robinsong- Reddish-orange she-cat with yellow eyes.

Dovetail- Cream-colored she-cat with darker patches, orange eyes.

Basilfang- Pale tabby tom, golden eyes.

(Apprentice: Lilypaw)

Parsleyshade- Ginger tabby she-cat, amber eyes.

(Apprentice: Brightpaw)

Mousefall- Pale tabby tom with fiery amber eyes

Squirrelstrike- Slender, dusky ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices:

Daisypaw- Cream-colored she-cat with darker flecks and amber eyes

Lilypaw- White she cat with pale yellow eyes, deaf in one ear

Brightpaw- A white tom with black ears and paws, blue eyes

Twisterpaw- White she-cat with black patches, pale green eyes

Magpiepaw- Gray-and-white tabby she-cat with green eyes

Galepaw- Dark gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes

Finchpaw- Ginger-and-cream tom, yellow eyes

Sparrowpaw- Reddish-brown tom, deep golden eyes

Queen: Mothtail- White-and-pale-brown tabby she-cat, yellow eyes

Kits:

Mothtail and Pinebristle: *Amberkit (pale brown tabby she-kit) Mosskit (pale tabby she-kit) and Thornkit (pale tabby-and-white tomcat)*

Elders:

Pigeonwhisker- Pale-gray-and-white tabby tom with yellow eyes. He is the oldest cat in the Clan.

Pansypool- Pale tabby she-cat with reddish spots and amber eyes, a former healer of ForestClan.

Nightfeather- Long-furred, deep black tom with one white front paw and intensely yellow eyes.

Stormsong- Gray tabby tom with deep blue eyes

Chapter Sixteen

"What took you so long? The sun went down ages ago!" Pumpkin squeaked impatiently.

Twisterpaw shook out her pelt, still ruffled from the climb up the smooth channel in the cliff. "I had a busy day. Some kit nearly drowned, and I think my brother hates me now. But I learned how to swim, so..." she felt conflicted about her day, but shrugged it off. "I'm here now, though."

"Great! Let's go inside before the bugs get to us! I can't wait to hear all about your day." the fluffy ginger kitten spun on her heels and began bouncing away through the tall grass, but Twisterpaw drew back her head, hesitant. "Where are you going?" she asked uncertainly.

"In the house. Where I live with my grandfather." Pumpkin called over her shoulder. "Hurry up! You're going to miss feeding time."

"Feeding time? What's that?" Twisterpaw waded through the weeds, curious but alert.

Pumpkin was halfway across the grassy space she called a 'yard'. She was heading towards a structure that could only be a twoleg den, at least from what Twisterpaw knew about them. She watched as the kittypet stepped onto a smooth surface of pale stone in an angular hollow in the den. She stopped in front of a tall, fence-like surface in the side of the hollow. At eye level, there was a strange hole, outlined in white, covered by something clear.

"What is that?" Twisterpaw asked, slowly creeping onto the hard ground. It felt like the same rock that made up the channel, but a different color.

"The door, obviously. Pearl has to meow so loud to make her twoleg let her in. But I have a cat-flap!" Pumpkin smiled at her. "Come here! I'll show you."

The black-and-white she-cat noted the strange words as she edged closer. Pumpkin smiled at her before pressing her forehead against the clear surface. It gave in as the kittypet forced her way through, swinging back as she disappeared into the orange-ish glow from inside the twoleg den.

"Hello? Pumpkin?" Twisterpaw stepped closer, feeling the doubt trying to pull her back. "Where are you?"

The tabby reappeared, poking her face through the 'cat-flap'. "Come in! Just try it, it isn't that hard!" she urged.

Twisterpaw pressed her muzzle onto it, shoving her face inside. The air was warm, and smelled faintly of herbs and dust. She put one paw in, then the other. The floor looked like wood, but it was smooth and slick. She scrambled for a moment before she managed to place all four of her paws on it.

"Welcome to my home! This is the living room. Wanna sit on the couch? We can't claw it, though. Otherwise... we don't talk about the *spray bottle*." Pumpkin lowered her voice, but she was still talking way too fast.

The kittypet sprang away suddenly. "Look! My twoleg fed me already!" she squealed.

Twisterpaw followed her into another place, this one with a floor made of smooth stone. The walls were brightly colored, and overhead a harsh light shone on everything, illuminating many strange structures.

Pumpkin was vigorously eating something in a corner. She looked up as Twisterpaw scooted closer. "Sorry, I ate all the wet food already. But you can have some pellets, if you want." she offered.

"No, thanks. I'm not allowed to eat those." the apprentice declined.

"I'll go look in the laundry room and see if Mango's sleeping in there. I thought he'd hear us by now, but I guess I have to wake him up." Pumpkin licked off a few crumbs from her chest. "You'll like him. But his ears are really sensitive, so don't make any loud noises.

And he's also really old, so he won't be interested in playing or anything."

The kitten paused at the entrance to another place within the twoleg den. "Don't just stand there, Twisterpaw! Follow me!" she beckoned with her fluffy tail.

The she-cat reluctantly followed the kittypet into a darker space, where Pumpkin was pawing at an elderly tabby tom who was sleeping on a pile of strange-smelling, soft things.

"Come on, Mango! The wildcat's here!" she prodded him with an unsheathed claw.

"Alright, you. I'm coming." the tom stretched and yawned before sitting up and studying Twisterpaw, who was hovering in the previous space, not enthusiastic to follow a strange cat into the darkness.

"Twisterpaw, was it?" the old tabby said as he padded over. "Why don't you sit with us? When Pumpkin first told me about an apprentice of ForestClan, I was so excited. Why don't we sit down and chat?" He brushed past the two, waving his tail for them to follow.

"Oh! You've got to feel this carpet!" Pumpkin raced ahead back to the 'living room' and flopped over onto a strange, pelt-like surface.

Twisterpaw sniffed at it, then sat down cautiously on the grayish, furry mass. It smelled like the pile of soft things the tabby tom had been sleeping on.

"In case you haven't guessed, I'm Mango." the tom said, already nested deeply into the strange-smelling fur. "So, who are you? And who is your mentor?" he prompted her.

"I'm Twisterpaw. My mentor is Crowpelt. I'm training to be a warrior." she said simply, not willing to give out too much information. "What about you?" she asked the old tabby.

"Oh, let's see." Mango narrowed his eyes. "Let's see if this old tom can remember..."

After a while, he sat up. "I was born in ForestClan, about eleven years ago. Which would be one hundred and thirty-two moons ago. My name was Marigoldkit, and my siblings were Poppykit and Pansykit. One day, the healer Flickerfur received an omen. We would all be gifted with intelligence at some point in our lives, but our brains would suffer curses as we got older. My sisters were destined for greatness, but I was not." he recounted.

Twisterpaw's pale green eyes widened in the orange glow from above. "You were a ForestClan cat? And the brother of Poppystar and Pansypool?" she breathed.

"Ah, yes. Poppystar became leader and received the gift of reading emotions. Pansypool became a skilled healer with an excellent memory. I heard she retired because of her curses, though." Mango shook his head sadly. "It's been a while since the last time Poppystar has visited me. Pumpkin wasn't even born then." he flicked his tail at the kitten, who was curled up a few tail-lengths away.

"Why don't you go over there? I'm sure they'd be glad to see you." Twisterpaw urged.

"The last time I saw Pansypool, she didn't even recognize me. I suppose it was some kind of memory loss. And Poppystar... it wouldn't be right for a Clan leader to waste time visiting some old kittypet like me." Mango sighed sorrowfully, looking more mournful with each word.

"How did you become a kittypet?" Twisterpaw tried to change the subject.

"I gave up. I didn't see any point in staying in the Clans, when my insignificant fate was already sealed. I left on the night of my warrior's vigil. I only told Poppypetal." the ginger tom once again shook his head sadly.

"Oh. What was your warrior name?"

"Marigoldheart. I was honored for my faithfulness and dedication. How ironic, isn't it?"

Chapter Seventeen

"How are Basilpaw and Parsleypaw? Have they become warriors yet?" Mango lifted his head suddenly, his voice lightening.

"They're warriors now. Basilfang is mentoring an apprentice called Lilypaw. I think she's going to be a warrior soon, though. And Parsleyshade is mentoring my brother, Brightpaw." Twisterpaw recalled. "Oh, and Poppystar got a new apprentice yesterday. His name is Sparrowpaw."

The ginger tom smiled slightly. "Are they happy?"

"They're the happiest cats I know." Twisterpaw assured him. Then, a thought crossed her mind. "You mentioned Flickerfur? I was actually named after him, you know. I think he was Nightfeather's father, right?"

"Ah, yes! Your pelt does resemble his. Who are your parents?" Mango tilted his head, his yellow eyes catching the orange light.

"Brightspirit is my mother, and I don't know much about my father. His name was Darkcloud." Twisterpaw informed him.

"Ah, Snowspirit! That's Pansypool's eldest daughter. But Darkcloud..." Mango trailed off, his eyes narrowing. "I told Pansypool that tom wasn't right for her daughter. He was too... aggressive."

Twisterpaw shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. "What did he do?" she asked, not sure if she wanted to hear an answer.

"Oh, he was a kit when I left. What *did* he do?"

"That's the thing. He was exiled and no-one talks about it. I don't know why."

There was a silence as Mango straightened up, slowly curling his

tail around his paws. He yawned hugely, showing broken and yellow teeth. The black-and-white she-cat awkwardly looked away, glancing over at the slumbering Pumpkin. "So, you're her grandfather?" she prompted, changing the subject.

"Ah, yes. Her mother were struck by a monster when she was barely a few days old. And her father, my son, was slain by the dog across the street. I was going to raise her with my mate, but he passed away last spring." Mango said solemnly. "It's been hard, but she's brought major joy into my life." he seemed to perk up as he mentioned the kit. He pricked his ears forwards, staring intensely at Twisterpaw.

"Are you going to visit and bring us news of the Clans?" Mango asked hopefully, leaning forwards.

"Of course I will! It would be my honor." the apprentice practically beamed.

The rain was deafening, pounding on the roof of the apprentices' den. Water dripped down on the cats inside, who huddled together for warmth. Twisterpaw buried her face deeper into Galepaw's fur, wishing bitterly that Brightkit was here to shield her from the icy droplets that dripped down from the roof.

It had been almost two moons since her brother had been banished to the nursery. Now, the weather was warming up considerably, sending storms like these to ravage the valley. All apprentices were wide awake, unable to doze off as the new-leaf weather raged outside. The rain, wind, and unpleasant leaks in the den were constantly bringing them out of their light slumber.

Twisterpaw lay awake, staring at the roof. She had long forgotten any anger she held towards the white tom- now, she missed him miserably. She had never before appreciated his cheerful comments or comedic suffering as she did now, as her mind wandered to pleasant memories while she stared up at the woven pine needles.

"Are you awake?" Galepaw whispered from beside her.

"No. I'm asleep." Twisterpaw said sarcastically. Who could sleep

through a storm like this?

"Have you seen Magpiepaw?" the gray tabby tom asked.

"No. Have you?"

"She left for the dusk patrol and didn't come back. Do you think she got lost? Or hurt?" Galepaw fretted.

"You worry too much." Twisterpaw rolled over, sighing. She desperately needed sleep. Finchpaw and Sparrowpaw had been whispering to themselves all night, adding to the unfavorable sleeping conditions. Now, they were quiet. Twisterpaw covered her eyes with a front paw, desperately trying to block out any distractions.

The black-and-white she-cat tossed and turned, trying to find a suitable sleeping position. After a few attempts at comfort, she gave up, rising to her paws. Maybe a walk through the freezing rain would clear her head. She turned towards the den entrance, only to find a cat standing in the way.

"Wha- Brightpaw? What are you doing here?" Twisterpaw stepped back, accidentally crushing Galepaw's tail. The dark gray tom growled, rolling over.

"Can I sleep in here tonight?" the white tom ducked his head.

"Oh. I guess, if you want." Twisterpaw shuffled aside to make room for him.

His fluffy pelt was damp and freezing, but she curled up next to him anyways. No matter how annoying he could be, it was good to have him back. She was just drifting off to sleep when her ears pricked up sharply.

"I missed you. And... sorry about yelling at you. I can be a little impulsive sometimes." Brightpaw whispered.

"A little?" Twisterpaw snorted.

As she felt herself being tugged into a dream, she tried to ignore

her brother's freezing pelt pressed up against hers. It was immensely cold, but she felt a deep warmth next to him. It was good to have him back.

"Stop spinning around so much! I'm teaching you how to use strength, not speed!" Crowpelt hissed.

Twisterpaw jumped back, halting in her tracks. "But I'm using strength! You just can't catch me!" she dared.

Crowpelt rolled his eyes. "What if your legs get hurt? Then you won't be able to dart around like you always do. You need to stop relying on your speed. We've been over this." he critiqued.

It had been about a moon since Crowpelt had started reappearing in Twisterpaw's dreams, teaching her how to fight in the Frozen Forest. Even though she was quick and learned easily, he always had something to snap at her.

"And why are you so low to the ground? That's a great way to trip yourself." he shook his head. "You're doing great, Twisterpaw. But maybe you could put in a little more effort?"

The she-cat stretched out her legs, concentrating. Ever since the pair had started training in the Frozen Forest, her mentor had stopped treating her like a pest, and more like an apprentice. Any affection was rare and short-lived, but she worked hard for it.

"Is this good?" she fluffed out her tail to make herself look bigger.

"That's fine. Now let's try that again. Use your shoulders this time." her mentor said as he backed away into the mist. His voice gave off whispering echoes, just as it did whenever he was standing in the bluish fog.

After a few heartbeats, he charged at her. She leaped at one of his front legs, throwing her shoulder into his chest. She had a firm grip, but when they thumped into the mud, he had already pinned her.

"That was disappointing." he commented grimly, stepping away.

"Sorry. But I did use my shoulders, though. And strength."

Twisterpaw apologized, standing up and shaking the dirt from her pelt.

"You're not very strong, though." Crowpelt eyed her coldly. "You could be easily bested in combat by a merciless warrior who wouldn't go easy on you like your Clanmates do. But still... I think you're ready."

Twisterpaw stood up taller, being careful not to show too much excitement. "I'm going to meet other Frozen Forest warriors?" she tried not to let the anticipation into her voice.

"I suppose so. You won't get into any fights, will you?" her mentor was genuinely smiling.

"No, of course not!" Twisterpaw nearly squeaked.

"Good. Follow me- they're very excited to meet you." Crowpelt turned around and nearly vanished into the mist before his apprentice was able to catch up to him. As usual, the fog grew unbearably cold before thinning out in a grove of wicked-looking black trees. Scattered around the clearing were a few white boulders. Twisterpaw immediately recognized the familiar place where Crowpelt had brought her many times before. But this time, there were cats here.

She followed her mentor closer, examining the strangers. Some were obviously dead, with their bodies easily seen through. But many were living cats- most of them her age. Even worse, she recognized a few from her own Clan. Like Squirrelstrike and Robinsong, who glared back at her ruthlessly.

Of course they would be here. They were two of the most aggressive cats she knew. Twisterpaw strode towards the cats, but halted when she saw a terrifyingly familiar face.

Brightpaw was staring back at her, grinning widely.

"Hey, sister! Glad to see me?" he crowed.

Twisterpaw felt a strange prickling sensation. Shock? Betrayal? There was no way her brother was also training in the Frozen

Forest.

But here he was, grinning like an idiot.

Chapter Eighteen

"Well? Aren't you glad to see me?" Brightpaw demanded.

"Seriously? You're training here, too?" Twisterpaw managed.

"Well, yeah. Daisypaw brought me here last night. It's pretty cool, right?" he circled around, flinging up a few clouds of mist.

"All right, you two. It's time you met everyone." A pale gray speckled tom spoke from atop the tallest boulder. "I'm Wolfstride, one of the top living mentors. And this is my sister, Lynxpounce. We're both senior warriors of GroveClan." he nodded at a long-clawed she-cat beside him.

"We're going to teach you how to fight. But why don't all of the apprentices get to know each other first?" he beckoned with his tail. "Come on then, don't be shy."

Brightpaw blindly stepped towards the strange cats, plopping down in front of Wolfstride. Another pale apprentice silently hunched over beside him, and Twisterpaw recognized Possumpaw from MeadowClan, and the two small, grayish toms from DeltaClan. The fiesty ConiferClan apprentice, Oriolepaw, was also here with her brother, Wrenpaw. And pushing his way to the front was Adderpaw of GroveClan, Daisypaw by his side.

Twisterpaw recognized all of them from previous gatherings. She had talked with them about the weather, or news in the Clans. But none of them were evil, right? The worst things they did were pulling harmless pranks on their Clanmates. They were just dreaming in the Frozen Forest to be closer to their mentors and learn how to protect their Clan, right?

The black-and-white she-cat felt suspicion crawling up her spine as she cautiously settled down next to her brother, who was excitedly chatting with the rambunctious Adderpaw.

"Shut it, you two." Lynxpounce snarled, her cold voice cutting through the frigid clearing. "Wolfstride is talking now!"

The pale gray tom nodded from atop his perch. "Thank you, sister. As for the nine of you, I've heard reports of your excellent progress. We've agreed that you can be trusted to train together. For now, ignore the spirits watching. Forget everything you were taught about combat. Here, we use our teeth and claws. We don't show mercy. And we're going to teach you how to fight like *real* warriors." he said ominously.

Brightpaw and Adderpaw both chirped with joy, but Twisterpaw stared at the ground. She could feel the dead cats watching them like hawks, but she fought the urge to look back at them. Their eyes were creepy. In fact, everything about them was creepy. Actually, the whole place was creepy.

Wolfstride lectured on about power and fear, but she wasn't listening. Of course she wanted to earn the affection of her mentor and brother. Maybe she could even impress a few of her friends from other Clans. But not like this. It was dishonorable and shady.

But if she gave up now... what would they think of her?

"Twisterpaw, what did I tell you! Use your teeth!" Crowpelt hissed.

The she-cat scurried down the tree trunk, landing neatly on all four paws. "I know, I know. I tried, but it ran away." she said irritably.

"Again, your claws! You're always relying on your claws! If your paws get cut off in battle-"

"I don't think that's going to happen any time soon." she rolled her eyes. "And this isn't combat, Crowpelt. We're just hunting."

"What's all this yelling over here?" Dovetail poked her head out of the bushes. "You're scaring off the prey! Could you please fight a little quieter?"

"Sorry, Dovetail. I'll try to make him yell at me less loudly." Twisterpaw said sarcastically. Crowpelt let out a growl of annoyance.

She shot a glare at the dark gray tom before prancing into the bushes. On the other side, Twisterpaw located a tree and began digging at the roots where she had buried a blue jay. For once, she wasn't clawing at snow. The ground showed off wet mud where the ice had held it prisoner over the season. And in the warmest spots, blades of green grass pioneered through the dirt. The air was still cold and wet, but there were signs of the coming newleaf season.

"Is Brightp- I mean, is Brightkit still banned from gatherings?" she asked Dovetail, who was also digging up her prey by the same tree.

"Oh, I don't know. I think you'll have to ask Poppystar about that." she suggested.

Twisterpaw bit down on the blue jay, ready to carry it back to camp. Cardinalheart and Finchpaw had already left, eager to attend the gathering at sunhigh. Brightpaw would be an apprentice again! And of course, Mothtail's kits would be getting mentors. But Twisterpaw could feel the tingle of anticipation as she turned away from Dovetail and Crowpelt, trying not to race back to camp.

"Can I go ahead?" she requested, accidentally projecting her excitement.

"Sure, I guess. Just don't break your legs on the way back." Crowpelt said, oddly specific.

Twisterpaw sprang into the bushes, unable to hide her energy. Her brother was finally going to train with her again! She couldn't wait. The forest flew by as she sprinted uphill. She was breathing heavily and her paws squished uncomfortably in the unfamiliarly warm mud, but she didn't care. Low branches whipped at her sides, but she still carried on.

Suddenly, she slowed down. Up ahead in a clearing, there was a sight she had only heard about before. Flowers were blooming in the soft soil. She trotted closer, halting to stare at the orange and yellow petals. They were beautiful, gleaming in the midday sun. Her ragged breathing stirred the fragile blossoms as if they were caught in a newleaf storm. She drew back her head, admiring the patch of wildflowers.

For a few moments, she didn't move. But then, she heard something- a faint rustling in the distance. Maybe it was a squirrel, or some kind of large bird. Twisterpaw silently dropped her blue jay and crouched down, pricking her ears towards the noise. But it couldn't be prey. It was a loud rustling, most likely a larger animal. And it was heading straight towards her.

For a heartbeat, worst-case scenarios flashed through her mind. She had heard tales of foxes and boar and puma. Even the legendary moose made an appearance in her split-second worries. But what leaped out of the shrubs was not a fox or a boar. It was a cat, black as the night with only a white patch on their chest. They were beyond skinny- scrawny-looking, with bones clearly visible. But more importantly, they were hurtling towards her, long claws curved out menacingly.

Twisterpaw was knocked off her feet by the small cat, tumbling backwards in an attempt to throw them off. Her attacker leaped upwards onto a tree and clung to it bizarrely for a brief moment, but quickly sprang off, attacking her again. This time, the cat latched onto her exposed underbelly, placing an undersized paw on her throat. "Please don't hurt me!" Twisterpaw tried to plead, but the cat snarled widely in her face.

"Don't make any noise. I didn't come all this way to kill you. We need you alive. So if you want to see the light of another day, you'll come with me." the black she-cat growled.

"Um... no? I kind of have somewhere to be." Twisterpaw said stupidly.

"Whatever it is, it can wait. You're needed." the scrawny cat snapped.

"Oh, look! A giant bear!" Twisterpaw thrust one of her paws towards the sky. Her attacker glanced upwards, and she locked her jaws around her exposed neck, flinging the skinny cat aside. The black-and-white she-cat sprang to her paws and raced away, trampling the beautiful flowers in the process. When she glanced over her shoulder, the cat was silently standing on the remains of the flowers, glaring at her with dark eyes.

Many questions rumbled around her head, but she focused on remembering what little information she had gained from the black she-cat. The cat was all black, with a white mark on her chest and dark blue eyes. She was from CliffClan, as she recognized the scent from a rare appearance at a gathering. And she was trying to kidnap her, for whatever reason.

The last thing she noted was the scars on her face and shoulders. The black cat was her age, but looked as if she had fought in dozens of battles. Twisterpaw tried to think about her wording as she scrambled frantically through the camp entrance. On the other side, it was peaceful as ever.

Galepaw was closest to her, staring back at her with wide blue eyes. "Woah. Did you roll in honey and brambles?" he wrinkled his nose, clenching his teeth around a cluster of juniper berries he was carrying.

"Galepaw! I was attacked by a CliffClan cat! She was my age, with a black pelt and a white chest. She tried to kidnap me!" Twisterpaw blurted.

"Hang on, I think Ravenflight is calling. Sorry, but this is urgent." Galepaw suddenly whirled around and hurried into the healers' den. Twisterpaw stood back for a second, stunned. She had just been attacked by a CliffClan cat! Why was he walking away from her?

"Galepaw, where are you going? This is an emergency!" she called, shoving her way into the healers' den. She stumbled in on a strange sight. Shadowsweep was curled up in a nest, twitching oddly. The other healers were gathered around, along with Poppystar.

The ginger she-cat put a paw on Sagepool's shoulder. Her son was silent as ever, but he looked rattled. "You did the right thing. Shadowsweep's visions can be a little hard to handle. It's okay to ask for help." the leader said gently.

"This isn't a vision!" Shadowsweep practically screeched from her nest. "This hurts much worse than usual!"

"Galepaw, do you have those juniper berries yet?" Ravenflight said

from beside the nest.

"Of course." the gray tabby tom padded forwards and placed the cluster at his feet. Ravenflight took a pawful and held them out to his sister. The black-and-white healer narrowed her eyes. "I don't need those. Not when I'm receiving a prophecy." she grunted.

"A prophecy?" Galepaw breathed, shocked.

"Twisterpaw! What are you doing in here?" Ravenflight sat up suddenly, finally noticing the muddy apprentice.

"I... um..." Twisterpaw fumbled for words, adrenaline fogging her brain.

All cats stared at Shadowsweep as the healer sat up abruptly. "Many will wield the light as they search the shadows, but there will be one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star." she announced.

The den was quiet for a terrifying moment, but then Ravenflight spoke. "What does it mean, sister?" he asked, nearly inaudible. Shadowsweep rubbed her eyes with a paw. "I don't know. I've had visions about robins and magpies and all sorts of songbirds lately, but... darkness and light? This kind of prophecy could mean anything." she sighed.

"Do you think... it's about Darkcloud? That he's the darkness?" Ravenflight suggested.

"I don't know. I need time to think." Shadowsweep circled around in her nest, settling into the moss.

Galepaw stepped forwards, asking an arrangement of questions about his mentor. Poppystar stood up quickly, silencing the cats with a wave of her tail. "Shadowsweep needs to be left alone, for now. And Twisterpaw..." she trailed off, taking in the sight of the mud-covered apprentice.

"What happened to you?" she said, suspiciously gentle.

Chapter Nineteen

"I swear, she was right here!" Twisterpaw protested, waving her tail at the trampled flowers. "She even took my blue jay! You were with me on the patrol, Dovetail. You saw me catch it." she desperately looked up at the warrior.

The pale brown she-cat shook her head. "I'm sorry, Twisterpaw. But this story isn't very believable." she admitted.

"Why would I lie about this? I was attacked by a CliffClan cat!" she protested.

Poppystar raised her head from where she was sniffing at the flowers. "It just doesn't make sense. CliffClan is so far away. There's no explanation as to why a malnourished black she-cat from the northern mountain would come all the way down here in an attempt to kidnap a ForestClan apprentice. And I don't even smell anything here." she reasoned.

"But it happened! You can't smell it because you're a thousand moons old!" Twisterpaw wailed.

Dovetail and Poppystar shared a look before Dovetail gave her a small smile. "Maybe you just imagined it, dear." she suggested.

"Let's go back to camp, shall we? I'm sure you'll feel much better when you can train with your brother again." Poppystar turned back towards the camp, ambling through the dense undergrowth. Twisterpaw followed, hanging her head. Neither of the she-cats believed her!

She cast a sorrowful look back at the clearing, hoping that whoever had attacked her wouldn't be making another appearance anytime soon.

Even though many cats had already been waiting by the tree when Twisterpaw got back to the camp, she spotted many heads poking

out of their dens. They eyed the three she-cats curiously, whispering to themselves. Sandyfur leaped off of the deputy's boulder and bounded over, concern glittering in her eyes.

"Mother! What's going on? Shadowsweep got a prophecy? And what's up with Twisterpaw?" the cream-colored she-cat demanded.

"I'll give details later. I have important things to do now." Poppystar stated calmly, brushing past her deputy.

Twisterpaw glanced around and spotted Galepaw trotting towards her. He was carrying a wad of wet moss. "Here. This might help you clean up. I think I saw Ravenflight do this once." he offered, pressing it into her fur.

"Thanks," she snapped, sounding rattled.

"So what was all that about? You looked like you'd just seen a spirit." Galepaw commented, working the mud out of her fur.

"Oh, that... so weird. I thought I saw some rogue on our territory." she lied. "I ran all the way back here to warn everyone."

"If you saw a rogue on a hunting patrol, wouldn't you go to Crowpelt or Dovetail?" Galepaw narrowed his eyes.

"Um..." Twisterpaw shook her head. "I don't know. I was really scared, and I was closer to the camp." At least that part wasn't a lie.

"Have you seen Magpiepaw? I haven't talked to her ever since Snowspirit took her on a hunting patrol last night. Isn't that weird?" Galepaw shrugged. "I can't stop worrying about them. I asked Mothtail about it, but she just said she hadn't missed either of them. How rude."

"All cats of ForestClan, please gather for a Clan meeting!" Poppystar yowled from the leader's tree. Galepaw put the moss down and scooted forwards to join the cats, Twisterpaw following closely behind. Nearly every warrior was already gathered below the leader, but she waited patiently as the last of the elders sat down.

"The past few days have held some unusual events." she began. "Shadowsweep has given us a prophecy, of which I'm sure she's informed of you already. If anyone has any information regarding the meaning of said prophecy, please visit the healers' den. On top of that, Twisterpaw claims she has sighted an unfamiliar cat on our territory. Please keep an eye out for a slender black she-cat with a white chest and green eyes." the leader nodded at Twisterpaw.

The black-and-white she-cat got a few looks from Galepaw and a few other apprentices, but she tried her best to ignore them.

"Daisypaw and Lilypaw took their assessments this morning. They both surpassed expectations, giving us plenty of prey. You two, please step forwards." Poppystar beckoned with her tail.

Two moons ago, Daisypaw had looked soft and cuddly. But now, Twisterpaw noticed how muscular her shoulders were. She looked a lot fiercer than her sister Lilypaw, who had not been training in the Frozen Forest. Daisypaw carried herself with more confidence than ever, looking around sharply at the cats who congratulated the two.

"Daisypaw, ForestClan recognizes you for your morale and spirit. From now on your name will be Daisyshine." the tabby she-cat proposed.

Not many of the gathered cats cheered for her, but Daisyshine looked just as smug as ever. Poppystar waited for the crowd to settle before she continued. "Lilypaw, ForestClan recognizes you for your compassion and excellent hunting skills. From now on your name will be Lilyspring." she announced.

The white she-cat dipped her head shyly. Twisterpaw had only talked to her a few times, but she knew she was a kind and caring cat. She called out her name joyfully, and Lilyspring smiled slightly, embarrassed.

"Now, Mothtail and Pinebristle's three kits have reached the age at which we must guide them into their roles in the Clan. Mosskit, Amberkit, and Thornkit, please step forwards." the ginger she-cat called out.

The two she-kits looked nervous, but soon perked up when they saw the other apprentices giving them looks of encouragement. Thornkit, however, looked very excited. He was clearly filled with energy, fidgeting enthusiastically.

"Mosskit, your name is now Mosspaw. Your mentor will be Cedarspike." Poppystar commanded. The pale tabby she-kit edged closer to the large, light brown-and-white tom. Cedarspike glanced doubtfully up at his leader, but then winked at her heartily before touching noses. Twisterpaw joined in cheering for the new apprentice, who shied back at the yowling. But wasn't Cedarspike supposed to retire soon, along with his brother Sprucefall?

"Amberkit, your name in now Amberpaw. Your mentor will be Robinsong." Poppystar watched as the pale brown kit stepped towards the irritable warrior. Amberpaw hesitated as Robinsong glared at her before reluctantly accepting her fate. Twisterpaw narrowed her eyes, unsure. The reddish-orange she-cat was so hostile. Was she really the best choice of mentor for a nervous kit?

"Thornkit, your name is now Thornpaw. Your mentor will be Dovetail." Poppystar tipped her head at his mother. Thornpaw's face fell, and he looked confused. His mother's sister was the kindest cat in the Clan, of course, but some would consider her to be lazy. She almost never went on patrols, spending the vast majority of her time in the camp. How could she be expected to train such a lively apprentice?

Now, the speckled cream she-cat looked up at her leader, her head tilted. "That can't be right, Poppystar. You told me Mothtail would mentor him. I'm retiring to the nursery to be a permanent queen, remember?" she reminded the elderly ginger tabby.

"You're mentoring Thornpaw." Poppystar said flatly. Mothtail glanced around at the warriors before shrugging, leaning down to touch noses with her sister's son. Many cats held back their congratulations, as the warrior clearly was not interested in mentoring the energetic apprentice.

"Oh, and one more thing. Parsleyshade is a queen. She and Cardinalheart are expecting a litter of kits." she announced after the

sparse cheering had died down. Twisterpaw felt a spark of joy. The two had always been near each other, hadn't they? It was quite obvious that they were in love.

"Now that Mothtail's kits have become apprentices, Brightkit has served his punishment for defying me and starting an argument at a gathering. His name shall now be Brightpaw, and he shall resume his training with Parsleyshade." Poppystar announced, to the Clan's shock.

"Wha- Mother, I'm a queen! You told me one of the senior warriors was going to mentor him!" Parsleyshade protested from her place by the nursery.

"Yes, yes. It won't be that long until he becomes a warrior anyways. I'm sure you can do it." the leader waved her off with a paw. "This gathering is dismissed. If you have any questions, please ask me." she prepared to jump down from the tree.

Many cats stepped forwards, protesting as the leader landed clumsily on the ground.

"I can't mentor him! I'm pregnant!"

"Are you sure Robinsong would be a good match? Her training methods are too aggressive."

"Poppystar, you were supposed to announce that I'm retiring! I can't take on another apprentice!"

"How am I supposed to mentor that ball of energy? All I wanted was something less demanding!"

Twisterpaw stood up, observing the cats. But before she could say anything, Brightpaw bounced over. "Isn't this great? Poppystar said I'll be a warrior soon!" he squealed.

"Is it just me, or has she been acting strange lately? I mean, those aren't the best cats to be assigning to those apprentices." Twisterpaw shook her head. "It must be the curse."

Brightpaw seemed to perk up even more. "What curse?" he

demanded.

"Oh, nothing."

"Come on, Twisterpaw! You've got to tell me!"

"You ruin everything. You know that right?" Twisterpaw glanced around to make sure no-one was watching before she lowered her voice. "I met a cat who knows why Poppystar isn't acting like herself. I'll show you tomorrow, but only if you promise not to tell anyone." she said reluctantly.

Brightpaw smiled enthusiastically. "I promise. You can trust me." he beamed.

Chapter Twenty

"How am I supposed to make that jump? I'll just slide off!" Brightpaw complained, staring up at the smooth rock.

"It gets easier. I've done it plenty of times, you know. And maybe all that weight will help you." Twisterpaw teased him. "Watch and learn."

She crouched down, focusing through the dawn haze. She was great at making vertical jumps, but her brother might not possess the same skill. She leaped upwards, her front paws landing just inside the fence. The she-cat dragged herself up and triumphantly gazed down at her brother.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Brightpaw backed up and took a wild leap towards the hole in the fence. He fell short about a tail-length, and scrambled furiously at the smooth stone before sliding down, his claws scoring the dried plant matter that dotted the rock.

"Close! Try aiming higher, as if you were jumping straight up!" Twisterpaw encouraged.

After a few attempts, Brightpaw managed to squeeze into the hole in the fence. "So, what now?" he demanded, circling around and studying the yard.

"Now we go into the twoleg den. And remember, Pumpkin is the young one. Mango is elderly and his ears are sensitive, so don't make any loud noises." Twisterpaw detailed.

"Got it. No loud noises." the white tom echoed.

The two cats trotted across the lawn, pushing their way into the twoleg den. It was dark and quiet, with Twisterpaw sniffing around for a while before she was able to locate Pumpkin asleep on the structure she called a couch.

"Pumpkin, wake up! I brought a friend!" Twisterpaw hissed up at her. The kitten blinked open her eyes, immediately appearing wide awake. "Oh, cool! Who's this?" she leaped down onto the surface she called a carpet, staring up at the fluffy tom.

"I'm Brightpaw, Twisterpaw's brother. Your home smells weird." the white tom said formally.

"Aw, thanks! I'll go get Mango!" the kittypet chirped, racing off into the twoleg den.

"Seriously? You can't just insult her home like that, Brightpaw. Haven't you learned anything from spending two moons in the nursery?" Twisterpaw scolded.

"But it's true! Everything in here smells weird!" he protested.

After a few moments, Mango slowly padded onto the carpet. "Hello, Twisterpaw. You're here early. Who is this?" he asked calmly.

"This is Brightpaw. He's only going to be here for a little while, though. I'm just dropping in to give you some news." Twisterpaw informed him.

"Ah, so you're her brother? I've heard a bit about you." the elderly tom settled down into the furry floor.

"Brightpaw, this is Mango. He used to be a member of ForestClan before he left to be a kittypet. He's... Pansypool's sister." Twisterpaw introduced the elderly tom.

"Oh. I was wondering why you looked so old." Brightpaw said obliviously.

"Now, the news?" the ginger tabby waved him off with a paw, just like Poppystar had always done.

"Yesterday, we had a Clan meeting where two apprentices became warriors and three kits became apprentices. But Poppystar was acting weird. She was making really odd decisions about who mentored the new apprentices." she began.

"Go on. What was strange about it?" Mango inquired.

"Well, first of all, Brightpaw had been sent to the nursery for a while because he got into trouble during a gathering. While he was a kit again, his mentor became pregnant. But when Poppystar made him an apprentice again, she made her pregnant daughter mentor him!" Twisterpaw informed him.

Brightpaw sniffed indignantly. "She said so herself that I'd be a warrior soon anyways. We've been training for three moons now."

"But warrior training takes around six moons or more!" Twisterpaw reasoned.

Mango held up a paw. "Maybe the rules have changed. I don't see a problem with his mentor being pregnant if he'll be a warrior soon." he proposed.

At that moment, Pumpkin returned from the darkness. "Hey, guys! John's awake now! If you want any extra food, now's the time to ask!" she piped up.

"Who's John?" Brightpaw pricked his ears towards the kittypet.

"That's our twoleg. And Clan cats don't eat kittypet food, Pumpkin." Mango rolled his eyes.

A few moments after Pumpkin disappeared behind the couch again, the den was suddenly filled with the familiar orange light. Brightpaw crouched down, alert. "What is that?" he hissed.

"That's the lights. John makes it bright in here during the day. If you don't like it, we can go outside on the porch." Mango offered.

"Yeah. Sure. Outside is good." Brightpaw nodded.

Once the three cats were sitting on the smooth stone, Mango nodded at Twisterpaw to continue. "So, what was unusual about the new apprentices?" he prompted.

Twisterpaw thought for a moment, then told him. "Amberpaw and Mosspaw are really nervous, but Thornpaw is very hyper.

Amberpaw was apprenticed to Cedarspike. Do you remember him?" she asked.

The old tom smiled slightly. "Ah, yes. He was mentoring Mothtail when I left." he recalled.

"Wow. This guy's old." Brightpaw spoke up.

"If you're not going to be helpful, why don't you look around?" Twisterpaw snapped.

"Alright, fine." the white tom stood and stretched.

"Just don't leave the yard. The neighbors have dogs." Mango warned as Brightpaw walked away. "Anyways, what about Cedarspike?" he turned back to Twisterpaw.

"He was going to retire with Sprucefall, but instead he got another apprentice." the she-cat told him gravely.

"You mentioned Amberpaw was nervous? Well, maybe Cedarspike was the right choice. From what I've heard, he's good with apprentices. If he does want to retire, maybe Poppystar wanted him to train just one more cat. He's still kicking, isn't he?" Mango chuckled.

"Well, yes, but Mosspaw got apprenticed to Robinsong. And she's so aggressive! She mentored Squirrelstrike, and from what the elders say, she used to be a cheerful cat. But once she began training with Robinsong, she got really bitter. Is that really the best choice for an anxious kit?" Twisterpaw explained.

"But a warrior like that could teach a shy kit some confidence." the elderly tabby reasoned.

"Wait until you hear about Thornpaw! He got apprenticed to Dovetail, his mother's sister. He's full of energy, but his mentor was just about to become a permanent queen when Poppystar made him her apprentice!" the she-cat growled.

Mango was quiet for a moment, but then he hung his head. "I didn't think it would happen this soon. But I think Poppystar's days as a

leader may be numbered." he finally admitted. "I just kept denying it, but her judgement may be a little clouded these days. Is the Clan holding their own?"

Twisterpaw hesitated. "Well... Our senior warriors are really old. And the younger ones are really young." she admitted.

"Ah. I knew that would happen." Mango shook his head sadly.

"You should visit her! Why wouldn't you?" Twisterpaw suggested.

"Oh, all right. But I'm not sure if I can make it on my own. You'll help me, right?" Mango grumbled.

"Of course I will! You can count on me!" the she-cat promised. "Brightpaw! Get over here!" she called.

Chapter Twenty-One

"I'm so excited! I can't believe I'm meeting the leader of ForestClan!" Pumpkin squeaked.

"Only because you can't be trusted to be alone for a day." Mango grumbled.

"Are we there yet? How big is the territory?" the young kittypet chirped relentlessly.

"The ForestClan territory is the third-largest of the nine Clans. And we're not even at the territory yet." Twisterpaw explained, hitching her head at the forest ahead.

Brightpaw had trotted a few moose-lengths ahead, and was looking back at them every now and then. "Come on, you guys! The border's over here!" he called. Pumpkin broke into a run, streaking ahead of Twisterpaw and Mango.

"Wait! We should at least find the northern dawn patrol and-" Twisterpaw protested, but Mango cut her off.

"You think yelling at her is going to stop her? Don't waste your voice!" he chuckled.

Twisterpaw eyed Brightpaw as he chatted loudly with the young ginger she-cat. Was he really going to lead two kittypets right into the ForestClan camp? It seemed more possible as she stepped into the trees, Mango directly behind her.

"Are Twistedbramble and Ratchaser still here?" he asked after an uncertain silence.

"No, they got exiled too. But their kits Mousefall and Squirrelstrike have been warriors for-"

"What happened to Marmotkit?"

Twisterpaw thought for a moment, searching her brain for the name. "Um... who?"

"Nevermind." the old tom shrugged.

The two cats pricked their ears as they heard a high-pitched, terrified screech. "Pumpkin!" Mango yowled, springing ahead with surprising speed. Twisterpaw followed closely, realizing that the two young cats had disappeared from view. When she broke through the underbrush, she wasn't surprised to see Pumpkin pinned down by Robinsong.

The warrior lifted her head when she noticed Mango, her eyes flaring even more furiously. "Another kittypet?!" she snarled. "Mosspaw! Get him!"

The pale tabby apprentice edged towards the elderly tom, but hesitated. "Um... He doesn't look like a threat. No offense, of course." she mumbled at him.

"Not a threat?" the reddish-orange she-cat growled savagely. "If he were, he would have sliced you into pieces already."

"Robinsong, this is a misunderstanding. They're not invading, they're visiting. You can let Pumpkin go now." Twisterpaw reasoned.

Pumpkin's face had been smothered by one of Robinsong's huge front paws, but now the warrior sparingly stepped off the young tabby. The kitten immediately leaped away, sheltering behind her grandfather. "Mango! That scary cat was gonna hurt me!" she whimpered.

"Alright, they're visiting. What for?" Robinsong snorted.

"They want to see Poppystar! You'd regret it if you didn't let them through." Brightpaw said from where he'd retreated under a bush. "It's important!"

The warrior studied the kittypets for a tense moment, but then she gave a small shrug. "Whatever. Follow me, and don't touch anything." she ordered. Twisterpaw gave Brightpaw a disappointed

look as Mango and Pumpkin cautiously trailed behind Robinsong and her apprentice.

"Really, Brightpaw? I though you'd be all up in Robinsong's face." Twisterpaw joked.

"Very funny." he grumbled. "I'm not *that* stupid, you know."

"Everyone, this is Mango and his grandkit Pumpkin. They're kittypets who are visiting ForestClan for whatever reason." Robinsong declared. Daisyshine, Finchpaw, and Mousefall immediately began crowding the guests, asking many questions at once.

"Who is that cat?'

"Why does he smell so weird?"

"What were their names, again?"

"I'm not here to chat. I just want to see Poppystar." Mango held up a paw, just the way the leader always did.

Robinsong shouldered past the curious onlookers, shoving her way towards the leader's den. "She's usually in there. But don't think for a second you're going in there alone." she glared at the two intensely. "And if you think of trying anything..."

"They won't. And if you don't mind, Brightpaw and Pumpkin could stay outside, if you want." Twisterpaw suggested.

"Actually, you could stay outside, too." Mango proposed.

"Wha-why? Wouldn't-"

"How about you introduce Pumpkin to your friends?" Mango tilted his head at the young tabby, who was buzzing out answers to the questions asked by the inquisitive apprentices.

"Alright, I'll entertain her. Don't take too long." Twisterpaw turned towards the enthusiastic kitten.

"Hey, Pumpkin! Have you met Finchpaw and Thornpaw?" she asked. "They remind me of you."

"I don't know who Thornpaw is, but this is Finchpaw and that's Sparrowpaw." the kitten nodded to the two brothers. "Aren't they great?"

"Thornpaw must be on a patrol or something. He'd probably be the first cat to talk to you. He's about your age, too." Twisterpaw explained.

"So, Pumpkinpaw, what's it like being a kittypet? And are you the one who ran into a WoodClan apprentice?" Finchpaw guessed.

"I am, actually!" Pumpkin recounted passionately. "I was hunting in the woods and I saw this really cool-looking bird. But when I pounced on it, another cat did the same thing! Then this big cat started yelling at me to go away, so I did. I ran all the way back to my grandfather and told him all about it. But that night, I was sleeping in the swing and those mean cats came back and yelled at me again!"

She looked angry for a moment, but then returned to her usual smile. "And being a kittypet is kind of boring, actually. All I do is eat my food and sleep, at least in the twoleg den. Mango doesn't leave home much, but I like to wander around. I know a few kittypets, too! Like Pearl, my best friend. Her yard has this giant tree that-" her rambling was cut off as a wild scream rang from the leader's den.

Poppystar sprang out, her yellow eyes widened in fear. A puncture wound on her neck was dripping blood down her chest. "Attack! Attack!" she screeched.

Not a heartbeat later, Mango erupted from between the tree roots. His eyes glittered dangerously as he licked the blood from his muzzle. The elderly tabby whipped his head to stare at Pumpkin. "What are you doing, you useless kitten? Get her!" he snapped.

Robinsong was only a moment behind. The large warrior quickly pinned the elderly tom, who dug his crooked claws into her thick

fur and snapped at her with his yellowed teeth.

Pumpkin crouched low to the ground. "No! I told you I wasn't going to do it!" she wailed. Mango let out an infuriated yowl and slashed his claws across Robinsong's muzzle, driving her back just enough so that he could charge at Poppystar.

Twisterpaw watched helplessly as he bit her hind leg with his wickedly infected teeth. The she-cat hissed madly. "Cedarspike! Sprucefall! Get him!" she commanded. The two senior warriors were sleepily poking their heads out of their den.

In the time it took for Poppystar to yell out the names of her closest companions, Mango drove his bizarrely bent claws into her neck. She hissed something, but was drowned out by Sandyfur's enraged roar as the cream-colored she-cat tackled the tabby tom. He bit her front paw, but she swiped at his face with the other, forcing him to let go. After a brief struggle, Sandyfur killed the tom with a bite to the back of the neck.

The deputy whirled around, rushing towards her leader. "Poppystar! Are you alright? Who was that?" she demanded.

The tabby she-cat lifted her head from where she lay in a growing pool of blood. She tried to growl something, but couldn't. Even though Sagepool was silently tending to the profusely-bleeding hole in her neck, she struggled to speak.

More cats rushed out of their dens, whispering wildly. Basilfang and Parsleyshade crowded around their mother, while she still attempted to say something. Twisterpaw shook her head, trying to snap out of her stunned daze. Where was Pumpkin? Surely she could explain what just happened.

The ginger kitten was crouched beside the slain tom, but she whipped her head around when she noticed Twisterpaw's shadow. "I didn't know he was going to actually do it!" she sniffed, tears gathering in her eyes. "I had no idea."

Twisterpaw's heart ached for the small kittypet. "It wasn't your fault. I'm sure if you explain everything, the Clan will see that." she

said. Her voice sounded odd when she was trying to be gentle, as if she was trying to tell a joke. But no, she was not poking fun at the kitten who had just watched her grandfather be killed right before her eyes.

She edged closer, glaring around at the gathering cats. They stared back at her with hostile expressions. The black-and-white she-cat curled her tail around Pumpkin, closing her eyes against her Clanmates' harsh comments.

"That's her! She's the one who brought him into camp!"

"Leave that poor kitten alone! Can't you see she's mourning?"

"What happened? Was Twisterpaw in on this?"

When she opened her eyes, she saw Mosspaw and Amberpaw also comforting the small kittypet. She searched the crowd for Brightpaw, but her brother was nowhere to be seen.

Of course he wouldn't comfort her, she thought. *If he felt any compassion for other cats, he would.*

She buried her nose in the fluffy ginger fur. *This'll be a long night, won't it?*

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I can't believe this. She's still not left the nursery, and it's been a whole day." Galepaw shook his head worriedly. "What if this leaves her traumatized? Is she going to starve in there? Did I offend her or something?" he fretted.

Twisterpaw once again peered into the den, where Pumpkin was curled up in the thick moss. It hadn't been cleared out since Mothtail and her three kits had left. The apprentice straightened up and narrowed her eyes at her dark gray brother. "I know there's a few things to worry about at the present, but didn't you say a few days ago that you hadn't seen Magpiepaw and Snowspirit in a while?" she asked.

"Oh. Um... I think so. I asked Ravenflight about it, and he just told me they went to some rocks or something. I think he was talking about the cliff near the twoleg dens." he recalled.

"Pumpkin!" Twisterpaw bounced to her feet, raising her voice. "I've got a task for you!"

The ginger kitten blinked awake and stirred in her nest. "Hey, Twisterpaw. What is it?" she said, without her usual flair.

"How about we go to the twoleg dens and look for my mother and sister? We haven't seen her in a while." Twisterpaw tried to sound cheerful.

"Oh. Okay." Pumpkin rose to her paws solemnly. "I'll lead the way."

"Are you sure that's how it works?" Twisterpaw tilted her head at the structure Pumpkin called a 'gate'. She stared at it doubtfully. "How?"

"I've seen John do it plenty of times. When I tried it, it worked for me." the kittypet stepped forwards to demonstrate. She leaped up

and swatted at a shiny black stick attached to the gate. It sprang upwards, falling back in the other direction. Pumpkin landed neatly and pushed on the gate. It tilted open.

"Wow. I never would have figured that out." Twisterpaw as getting good at her cheerful voice, but it had no effect on the ginger tabby. "Yeah. It took me a while to get it right." the kitten shrugged slightly, her voice dull.

The black-and-white she-cat followed her into the open air. The grass here was unnaturally short, and smelled sharp and unfamiliar. Twisterpaw wrinkled her nose until they stepped onto a hard, flat grayish stone. "Woah. Is this a thunderstone?" she breathed.

"Yeah. But it's a pretty quiet one." Pumpkin suddenly perked up as she touched the grass on the other side. "Here's where Pearl lives. She's usually underneath that bush in the morning." she pricked her ears at a leafy green shrub. "I think I see her."

"Hello, Pumpkin!" a cream-colored she-cat said warmly as she stepped out of the greenery. "Who's this?"

"That's Twisterpaw, my best friend." Pumpkin's voice was missing her usual enthusiasm, but she still waved her tail excitedly. "She's looking for her mother and sister. One is fluffy and white, and the other is a gray-and-white tabby. Right?" she glanced back at Twisterpaw, who nodded supportively.

"I know someone who fits that exact description!" Pearl piped up. "Follow me, Twisterpaw!"

The three she-cats continued down the row of twoleg dens, squinting their eyes against the bright sunlight. Twisterpaw looked around nervously, realizing that she had lost track of where Pumpkin lived. "Um... Do you guys get lost anytime?" she asked.

"Oh, no. I visit my friends a lot, and I've never gotten lost. I don't know why I didn't introduce you to some of them sooner." the ginger tabby said, sounding brighter with each word.

"Who's the cat you're taking us to?" Twisterpaw asked. Pearl looked

back briefly, slowing down to talk to the two younger cats. "I'm taking you to Blizzard. They've lived here since before I was born. And they're deaf, but can tell what you're saying if they can see you speaking. But beware of that dangerously fluffy fur. One time I got tangled in it! Ah, those good old days before Rex and Grizzly." she informed them.

"Who's Rex and Grizzly? Are they rogues who live here?" Twisterpaw looked around once more. She hadn't met any hostile cats near the twoleg dens, but she had heard tales of the alleycats that hung around at night. But it was broad daylight now, with the sun shining down mercilessly on the three cats.

"You don't speak dog, do you?" Pumpkin guessed.

"Um... no. I haven't seen a dog in my life." Twisterpaw admitted.

"You've got to meet Biscuit, then!" Pearl said merrily. "But anyways, here we are. Blizzard doesn't usually go outside, but they have a cat-flap anyways." she veered off course and padded into another yard. The two younger cats followed her behind the twoleg den, where there was a hollow, much like the one in Pumpkin's twoleg den.

But instead of the cat-flap being in the side of the hollow, it was on the wider back of it. Pearl gracefully ducked into the twoleg den, closely followed by Pumpkin and Twisterpaw. "Blizzard? Are you on the counter again?" Pearl called out.

"I'm over here, Pearl. I see you." a smooth voice answered from somewhere above one of the strange structures illuminated in the unnatural light.

"Blizzard! Your twoleg doesn't allow you on the counter, does she?" Pearl scolded. "Come down and speak to us!"

A moment later, the huge white cat jumped down from the structure. "Alright, what is it you- Oh, guests! Lovely!" Blizzard purred. "I haven't seen you in a while, Pumpkin. And who is this lovely visiter here?"

"That's Twisterpaw. She was asking about a fluffy white cat, so obviously I thought of you. Is this who you're talking about?" Pearl nodded at Blizzard.

"No. But it was nice meeting you anyways." Twisterpaw dipped her head politely.

"Nice to meet you, too. I hope you find who you're looking for." Blizzard turned on their heels and walked away, their gigantic tail waving comically.

"I guess we'd better head back before noon. That's when Rex and Grizzly get walked by their twolegs." Pearl headed back towards the cat-flap, leading them out. Once outside, they began the walk back.

"So, do you speak dog?" Twisterpaw jabbed at Pumpkin. The young tabby nodded excitedly. "Of course I do! You should meet Biscuit. She lives right next to me! But she also doesn't go outside because she's so old. And there's Roxy, who is only let out on some days. But I'll give you a fair warning. Her pellets taste terrible!" she giggled.

"Oh. I wasn't planning on eating any." Twisterpaw offered.

Suddenly, she heard a sniffling noise. She looked across the thunderstone to where Pumpkin's twoleg den was, a few moose-lengths ahead. On the other side, two beasts were dragging along a twoleg, pulling at an odd thing that bound them to the twoleg's paw.

"That's Rex, the reddish-and white one. And the other is Grizzly, the thick-furred brown one. We should hide before they see us." Pearl said, jumping off the pale stone path they had been walking on. "Over here!" she waved with her tail to a spot between a wall of bushes and a pile of what Twisterpaw recognized as trash bags. Pumpkin had told her many tails of her close encounters.

Now, the young kittypet held back. "But Pearl! Those make loud noises!" she protested.

The cream-colored she-cat rolled her eyes. "Only when a twoleg is holding it. Everyone knows that. Now, come on before the dogs see

you."

Twisterpaw settled next to Pearl, and Pumpkin soon stood beside her. They watched as the two dogs pulled the twoleg past them. When they had almost turned a corner, Twisterpaw let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Dogs looked terrifying! She didn't want to go within a lake-length of one.

She followed Pumpkin as the fluffy tabby strode towards the path. Something caught on one of Twisterpaw's hind feet as she stepped out from behind the pile of trash bags, and she pulled on the strange blue thing that had caught on her leg. After a moment of tugging, she pulled it loose, but the trash bag shifted towards her. It made a noise like thunder as it toppled over.

Twisterpaw streaked towards the path, halting once all four paws were placed safely on the pale stone. She turned to face Pearl, who looked at her with a shocked expression. "Twisterpaw! The dogs!" the cream-colored she-cat hissed.

The apprentice turned around to see the larger dog, Rex poking its head around the corner of a bush. The beast locked eyes with the motionless cat. Twisterpaw took a step back, and it tilted its head curiously. It trotted closer, but broke into a run once she backed up. The beast charged, letting out a grotesque growl.

At that moment, Pumpkin leaped out from somewhere behind her. The tiny kittypet's already-fluffy fur was stretched to its limits, making her appear much bigger than she actually was. Before Twisterpaw could even register the strange sight, the apprentice began making low, monstrous sounds. She was barking at a dog.

Rex halted, tilting his head to the other side. He growled something at the kitten, then turned and trotted away, the strange thing trailing behind him.

Pumpkin tried to smooth down her fur. "Sorry about that. They usually wouldn't charge at a new cat, but he thought you were one of those strays." she said, trying to control her rowdy pelt.

"You... just... spoke in another tongue!" Twisterpaw's shock turned

to joy. "That's so cool! I didn't know cats could talk to other animals!"

"I'll leave you two to it. This is my territory, right here. But I'll see you around?" Pearl waved her tail at Twisterpaw as she walked away into her yard.

"Um... I don't know. Pumpkin, you still live here, right?"

The ginger kitten looked down at her paws for a heartbeat, but then raised her head, a grin spreading across her face. "Why do you think I was hunting on wildcat territory? I don't want to eat and sleep in a twoleg den all day. I want to live in the forest, with the trees and birds and those awesome wildcats!" she beamed.

Twisterpaw hesitated for a moment. Just the morning before, she had watched her grandfather be slain by Robinsong. "You aren't mad at us for... what happened to Mango?" she asked sparingly as they crossed the stone path.

"Oh, no. He wanted me to help kill someone! Why would I be sad if that old grouch got what was coming to him? I don't know why he did it, but it's not my problem. I'm not like him. I don't really like being a kittypet. Family isn't everything, you know." Pumpkin said, ominously cheerful.

"So you're going to be an apprentice in ForestClan?" Twisterpaw couldn't help but feel excited for the kitten.

"Of course! You'll train with me, right?"

"You bet your tail I will."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Twisterpaw readjusted her grip on her vole. At her side, Pumpkin was carrying a mockingbird that the apprentice had caught. Even though the kittypet was terrible at hunting, they still want to make a good impression on the Clan, in the form of Pumpkin carrying back some prey.

The rodent was slippery against her teeth. She bit it tighter to keep it from falling. The black-and-white she-cat had been an apprentice for three moons now. Tasks like hunting and patrolling were getting easier. Now, the Clan was expecting her to provide for them. It was hard having work to do every day, but Twisterpaw didn't mind. Being part of a Clan was all about helping each other.

But as for the kittypet beside her, things were different. Pumpkin had just returned from her search for a fluffy white warrior, and was now trying to convince the leaders of ForestClan to make her an apprentice. The two she-cats walked into camp, greeted by the sight of Sandystar talking to her new deputy, Mothtail. Twisterpaw shrugged off the looks she was getting from the older members of ForestCan as she circled around the prey-bush before placing her catch neatly on a branch.

"This is the prey bush. We put our prey here. I showed you, didn't I?" she tried to remember if she had shown the kitten around the camp before yesterday's bloodshed.

"Oh, yes. Finchpaw showed me around." Pumpkin answered, almost with her usual cheerfulness. She turned towards the apprentice den, where Galepaw was sharing prey with Mosspaw, Amberpaw, and Sparrowpaw. They talked quietly, no doubt gossiping. They all shared a similar sense of nervousness, one that usually involved the exaggeration of possibilities. Twisterpaw watched as the kittypet threw herself into the conversation, whispering and making jokes just like them.

Twisterpaw tried to think about what she could say about

Pumpkin. She was surprisingly strong, as she had pulled the apprentice up from her vertical struggle the first time she had met her. And she was brave, wasn't she? Pumpkin had leaped between her and a charging dog. And she was cheerful, something that Twisterpaw admired. Some might call it stupid, but being cheerful all the time is definitely a sign that a cat is strong and dauntless in the face of negativity.

"Twisterpaw. A word?"

The apprentice whirled around to find the old she-cat Mothtail standing over her. The pale brown tabby beckoned with her soft tail. "Come with me."

Once inside the deputy's cave between the deputy's boulder and the leader's tree, Twisterpaw sat down on the stone floor. In here, it was even more spacious than the leader's den! She admired the pebbles before Mothtail's voice jarred her back to attention.

"Did you know who Mango was before you met him?"

"He told me he's the brother of Poppystar and Pansypool. Marigoldheart, right?" the apprentice recounted.

"Yes. Did he tell you why he left the Clan?" Mothtail didn't show any clues.

"Um... he left the night of his warrior's vigil because he knew his sisters were destined for greatness and he wasn't?"

The deputy shook her head gravely. "I remember when he was exiled. I was a kit then. But Marigoldheart didn't choose to leave. Pumastar forced him to. One day he brought a litter of kits to the camp. Apparently he had a mate from the twoleg dens, and didn't tell anyone because he thought no-one cared. His mate had been slain by a border patrol, and he was left to try to get the kits into ForestClan- or should I say, kittens. They were the offspring of a kittypet." she explained.

"Oh. But that's not evil, is it?"

"Let me finish. It was the middle of leaf-bare, and Marigoldheart

was forced to leave ForestClan. He tried to climb up the rockiest part of the cliff near GroveClan territory, but one of the two kits fell and hurt its head. It was killed immediately. I think that one was Dandelionkit, and the other was Daffodilkit. But anyways, he tried to attack the deputy Poppypetal when she was returning from a gathering. Of course, she was injured and retired due to combined factors. I guess Mango was waiting for a weak spot to finish her off. That's where you come in." Mothtail narrowed her eyes at the apprentice.

"How could I have known Mango was going to kill Poppystar? It's just one of the secrets the Clan refuses to talk about. Like how Poppystar was going to lose her mind one day, and we still let her make all of the decisions. Or Snowspirit and Magpeipaw are missing, but everyone just brushed over it because no-one likes them. And I know you guys hate my father for some reason! It's pretty obvious!" Twisterpaw's voice could probably be heard from outside the den, but she didn't care. "No one ever talks about these things!"

"Even if we don't parade our Clan secrets around," Mothtail's eyes narrowed even more. "You believed every word he said. You gave him sensitive information about our leaders. And above all that, you led him into camp. Cedarspike and Sprucefall have been racked with guilt lately. Parsleyshade and Basilfang are hardly eating. And what about cats like Sandyfur and Sagepool? They care, too. Even if Poppystar was mild and passive and no one liked her, she had her good days."

Twisterpaw looked down at her paws meekly. "I'm upset about it, too. But it was an accident, really! Does this mean I'm in trouble?"

"Oh, yes. You are in big trouble. Our leader is dead because of you, Twisterpaw. And for that, you will inform the other Clans of this tragedy, and who caused it." Mothtail growled. "At the next gathering, we'll see how many of the other Clan apprentices think you're cool when you tell them that you led a murderer into camp. Now, get out of my sight. And try not to kill any more leaders until the full moon."

Twisterpaw nodded sorrowfully. She got to her paws and fled from

the cave, tears gathering in her eyes. Pumpkin was still chattering away with the other apprentices when she raced over. Brightpaw was just waking up, yawning hugely in the entrance to the apprentice's den. When he saw her baring her teeth a paw-length away, he jumped back.

"Hey, what's gotten under your fur?" he joked.

Twisterpaw yowled in fury, barreling him over as she shoved her way inside. "Shut up! Don't act like you don't hate me. I'm not stupid."

Brightpaw whirled around, his expression one of pure shock. "What happened to you? You're even more irritable than usual."

"I killed a cat, Brightpaw. And now everyone in the nine Clans is going to know about it."

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Twisterpaw! Wake up! You slept through my apprentice ceremony!"

The black-and-white she-cat blinked awake, looking around. She was laying in her nest, all alone in the apprentices' den. The ginger kittypet was standing in the entryway, blocking the light. "I'm Pumpkinpaw now! And guess who my mentor is!"

Twisterpaw rubbed her eyes, still half-asleep. "Uh... Who?"

Pumpkinpaw smiled impossibly. "It's Basilfang!" she chirped.

"Oh. Yeah, you two will get along well, won't you. Aren't you going to do things with him, though? Or is he taking your training slow?" Twisterpaw said, sitting up and blinking heavily.

"What do you mean? It's sunhigh! I have to rest after going on the dawn patrol and doing apprentice tasks all day!" Pumpkinpaw twittered.

"Sunhigh? Already?" Twisterpaw jumped to her paws, memories of the day before fading into existence. She was unpleasantly reminded of being yelled at by Mothtail, and the assignment of her punishment. She took a step towards the outside, but Pumpkinpaw threw her tail in her way. "Twisterpaw, have you been crying?" she asked, clearly concerned.

"Oh, uh... no. I just haven't woken up yet. I had a rough day yesterday because Mothtail's making me take the blame for our elderly leader's death. At the gathering in a few days, I have to tell the nine Clans it was my fault." the apprentice explained.

The fluffy tabby seemed to deflate a little bit, pulling back her tail so that her friend could walk through. "That's unfortunate. Hope you feel better." she attempted a smile, then yawned abruptly.

"Wake me up in time for the dusk patrol. I can't wait to see the forest at night!"

Twisterpaw brushed past the excited apprentice, blinking in the sunlight. For the first time in her life, the air was warm and welcoming. She sat down beside the tree that supported the roof with a low-hanging branch and began to groom her pelt. A night of tossing and turning had tangled her relatively long fur.

It was a while before she noticed Galepaw's shadow hovering in front of her. "Hey, Galepaw. What's that?" Twisterpaw said, nodding at the chickadee he was carrying.

"I brought you some prey. And some news." the dark gray tabby said as he placed the chickadee at her paws and sat down beside her. "I got back from the healers' half-moon meeting this morning, and we had a Clan meeting where Pumpkinpaw was apprenticed to Basilfang." he began. "But we also discussed some unfavorable news."

Twisterpaw paused from clawing the feathers off of the chickadee's chest. "What kind of unfavorable news?"

"At our meeting, Ravenflight was found drowned in the Moonpond. Any scent of an attacker had washed away, so we can only assume he rolled into the water in his sleep." Galepaw shivered for a moment. "It was terrible, seeing him floating lifelessly like that... but that's not all of the news. There have been a few more catastrophic events."

"Oh, really? Like what?"

"Well, Sandystar has finally addressed Brightspirit and Magpiepaw going missing. Of course, we had already told the other healers. But they showed more concern than I've seen out in our own Clan. There's also been a few changes, like those ancient senior warriors finally getting to retire." he nodded thoughtfully at his paws for a moment, but then seemed to remember that his sister was watching him.

"The MeadowClan healer, Heatherheart, said she had spotted a

strange cat on their territory while collecting herbs. The cat fits the exact description of the stranger who attacked you." he admitted.

"Oh. Isn't that good news? Now I'll be believed when I say I was attacked by a CliffClan cat." Twisterpaw felt her lingering anger dissolve around its sharp edges.

"Twisterpaw, Brightpaw got into a fight with his mentor on a morning hunting patrol. He was being disrespectful to her, so he was sentenced to a moon of doing every apprentices' tasks and not being able to leave camp. But he was threatened and started yelling things about certain cats. He said that there were other cats who needed to be punished, not him" Galepaw fretted.

"He said that him and Daisyshine had been training in the Frozen Forest. That kind of deed receives serious punishment around here. Oh, and that you had been bringing Mango information for a while before he murdered Poppystar." Galepaw finished.

"Seriously?!" Twisterpaw dug her claws into the wet dirt, her fury making a reappearance just as she thought it was gone. "I get my fur yelled off by Mothtail, then Brightpaw goes and ruins my reputation *again*?!" she yowled. A few of the cats looked up from their sunhigh meals, giving the apprentice condescending looks.

Galepaw flinched back. "Um... what reputation?"

"You know. My reputation of being a responsible and honorable warrior."

"Stop stepping on my tail!" the reddish-orange she-cat snapped.

"Sorry, Robinsong! I'm just... nervous." Twisterpaw ducked her head.

"Did I ask?" the irritable warrior snorted.

The pebbles felt less prickly every time she went to a gathering. This was her third one, and her paw pads weren't even bleeding yet. She was already stepping across the smooth sand that faded into the now-lush grass, her paw pads feeling not even a prick of pain. Some of the blades of grass were almost up to her chest! Newleaf was in

full swing.

The apprentice's flash of joy soon faded when she looked around to see the GroveClan, DeltaClan, and MeadowClan cats gathered around. Their leaders Pikastar, Claystar, and Barleystar were talking with Sandystar, clearly concerned for the old ForestClan leader.

Twisterpaw broke away from the ForestClan cats, with Pumpkinpaw and Galepaw trailing at her side. "The last time I went to a gathering, all I did was sit beside Moonsweep as she talked endlessly with the other healers. But I did meet Fernpaw. She's nice. She gave me herbs so that I wouldn't fall asleep on the way back!" Galepaw recounted, his unusually-cheerful voice falling suddenly.

"But now she's a full healer. Fernflutter. And I didn't meet any of the usual apprentices. What if they think I'm weak for being a healer? Are they-"

"Quit worrying so much, Galepaw. I'll introduce you to all of the nice ones." Twisterpaw reassured. "Have you seen Pumpkinpaw?" she asked suddenly.

Her brother's dark gray head shot up, and he searched the tall grass for the ginger tabby. "Uh, I think she ran off." he reported.

"That's fine, she won't get into any arguments like Brightpaw would." Twisterpaw said softly. She trotted over to the cluster of dark green bushes, where the apprentices were usually gathered. As she neared her friends, she called out their names. "Lemmingpaw! Possumpaw! Gillpaw! Come meet my little brother!"

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Really? SpiritClan cats live in the sky and walk on clouds?" Lemmingpaw breathed.

"Yes. They glow like the sun, too. It's warm and extremely bright up there, plus they're really hot to the touch." Galepaw detailed.

"I heard they eat sun-rays and cause the weather!" Adderpaw butted in rudely. "I don't know about rain and hail, though." the bold tom joked.

Galepaw flattened his ears. "SpiritClan cats are to be *highly regarded*, you know."

Possumpaw was visibly fighting down giggles, but she soon recovered to ask the healers' apprentice another question. "So you speak with SpiritClan while at the Moonpond every half-moon, but does that mean that you can also go to the Frozen Forest?" she said, quiet as ever but a lot less shy than she had been the first time Twisterpaw had met her.

"I don't know. I think any cat can go to the Frozen Forest. What's it like?" Galepaw asked, tilting his head at the pale gray she-cat.

"It's really cold. The mud will swallow you if you're not careful. There's this bluish mist everywhere, and the only scenery is a bunch of dark trees and white rocks, and..." Possumpaw trailed off, seeing the glare Adderpaw was giving her.

"At least, that's what Brackenburn says. He's our only Clan elder, ever since Sproutseed passed over the cold season." Possumpaw recovered. There was a heavy silence among the group, in which Adderpaw and Twisterpaw gave her disapproving looks.

Soon, though, Adderpaw's loud voice broke through the quiet moment. "So, Galepaw, what SpiritClan cats have you seen? And how's Brightpaw?" he gave the nervous ForestClan tom a friendly

shove with one of his large, dark brown paws.

"Since all of the cold-season snow has melted, Brightpaw would normally be allowed to go to gatherings. Plus his other punishment for nearly letting Finchpaw drown, but he's already done the time. He would be here, but he got in a fight with his mentor Parsleyshade while they were on a hunting patrol. For the next moon, he has to do all of the apprentice tasks." Galepaw said, obviously pitying his older brother.

"And about SpiritClan, I talk to lots, actually. I've seen leaders of the past, like my grandmother Marblestar. One time I talked to Berrytail, the legendary WoodClan healer. And other notable Clan leaders, of course. There's Yellowstar of MeadowClan, Streamstar of DeltaClan-"

"Speaking of leaders, what's up with Sandyfur? Is Poppystar sick or something?" Oriolepaw burst in from over Adderpaw's shoulder.

"Oriolepaw, go back to playing your stupid games with the others. We're talking about SpiritClan." Adderpaw flicked his tail at the fiesty ConiferClan tabby. "Anyways, you were saying, Galepaw?"

"Actually, what did happen to Poppystar?" Gillpaw spoke up from where he was crouched beside Possumpaw, their pelts almost blending in. The pale gray tom rarely spoke, but all apprentices listened when he did. Now, the four turned to the two ForestClan cats. Galepaw looked at Twisterpaw, his expression unreadable.

"I heard she died because a tree branch fell on her!" an excited voice piped up from behind her. Twisterpaw whirled around to see Pumpkinpaw grinning at them. The tabby's pelt was fluffed up from her adventures buzzing around the clearing. "Is that true?" she prodded.

"Seriously? You were there." Twisterpaw said flatly, but then remembered the cats watching her. "This is Pumpkinpaw, the newest apprentice of ForestClan. Her mentor is Basilfang." she introduced the former kittypet.

"Oh, hey, Pumpkinpaw. I haven't heard the ForestClan leader

announce any other kits. And is that a GroveClan or MeadowClan name?" Lemmingpaw said warmly, welcoming the younger she-cat.

"No, I used to be a kittypet. But then I met Twisterpaw and now I'm an apprentice of ForestClan!" Pumpkinpaw said enthusiastically, squeezing between Lemmingpaw and Twisterpaw.

"How can a kittypet become a Clan cat?" Adderpaw sneered, wrinkling his nose at the idea.

"Any cat can join a Clan at any time, as long as the former Clan agrees. At least, that's our current rule. I wasn't born in MeadowClan, you know. A patrol found me on the CliffClan border, and I was adopted by Quailflight. She's the mother of Volepaw and Shrewpaw, but don't expect to see those two talking to anyone but Wrenpaw and Oriolepaw. Oh, and Quailflight is also my mentor." Possumpaw said humbly. Her voice never carried far, but still the apprentices leaned in to hear what she had to say.

"See? I *so* can become a warrior of ForestClan!" Pumpkinpaw puffed out her chest, nearly knocking the small Lemmingpaw over. "I wonder what my warrior name will be. Pumpkinstream sounds nice." she pondered over it for a moment.

"Pumpkinstream is a DeltaClan name." Gillpaw said simply.

"So? What if I want a DeltaClan name? You guys were just saying-"

Sensing a parallel to Brightpaw's arguments, Twisterpaw brushed her tail over Pumpkinpaw's shoulder. "It doesn't work like that. You'll learn that soon, though." She turned back to the others. "Sorry. She hasn't been an apprentice that long."

"But I already know so much!" Pumpkinpaw waved her tail at the structure Twisterpaw now knew as a 'bench'. The she-cat's tail nearly knocked her over, too. "I know that Ospreystar is the leader of ConiferClan, Sequoiastar is the leader of WoodClan, Quartzstar is the leader of CliffClan, Barleystar is the leader-" the tabby's rant was cut short by Galepaw's shocked meow.

"CliffClan?" the healers' apprentice whirled around to stare at the

bench where the leaders sat. "This is their second appearance in a row! But they never show up to gatherings..." he trailed off, his eyes going wide.

"I remember the first time I saw CliffClan. Don't they smell weird? They don't really talk a lot, but their stench is enough to send seasoned warriors running from a battle! What do they eat, carrion? Roadkill? They shine like gemstones, but seriously, don't they even-" Adderpaw was also cut off by Galepaw.

"Twisterpaw..." the dark gray tom breathed. "It's them. They're here."

"What are you talking about? Who?" Twisterpaw drew back her head, confused. Whatever her brother was looking at, it must be quite a sight. His expression was blank but his body was rigid, his dark blue eyes so big they looked like little moons.

"It's Snowspirit and Magpeipaw. They're here. But they're with CliffClan."

Chapter Twenty-Six

A few moments later, Twisterpaw was flying across the sharp pebbles.

"Mother! Sister!" she yowled. Sure enough, Snowspirit and Magpiepaw were sitting amongst the CliffClan cats who hung at the edge of the clearing, congregating under a tall conifer tree.

"There she is. I told you she'd be here." A tall and slender, pale gray CliffClan tom with darker flecks stepped between Twisterpaw and her target. The black-and-white apprentice skidded to a halt, almost colliding with the warrior.

"Step aside, Shattersweep. I want to talk to her." Snowspirit said from behind the tall cat.

"Alright, fine. Onyxpaw, come see this while you can. Look at her." the warrior, Shattersweep, lashed his long tail threateningly. A small cat stepped forwards, and Twisterpaw backed up in shock when she saw who it was.

"Hello." the scrawny, scarred black she-cat spat. "Nice to see you. Still alive, that is."

"More importantly, she's still in ForestClan. I sent you all the way there to get her, and you made it just fine. But I ask you to do *one thing* and you screw up your entire warrior's assessment." Shattersweep snarled at Onyxpaw, who glared back at the cat who must be her mentor.

"You mean... Onyxpaw is the one who attacked me? But why?" Twisterpaw shook her head, trying to make sense of it all. This was all so confusing.

"They were sent to collect you. To bring you to us. Because now, we are members of CliffClan. I was hoping that once you knew why we left you'd join us, but..." Snowspirit trailed off.

"What do you mean? I have no idea what you're talking about!" Twisterpaw felt the only emotion she could feel in a stressful situation. Anger. She dug her claws between the pebbles, fluffing out her fur. "Why does everyone know things I don't?" she growled, frustrated.

"Ah! You didn't even tell her anything!" Shattersweep snapped at Onyxpaw. "Oh, and look who it is. The legendary Galepaw himself." he turned to the dark gray tabby, who was now edging closer. "Wait. Where's the other one?" the tall warrior raised his head, searching the crowd for someone.

"Brightpaw is being punished. Again." Twisterpaw said through gritted teeth, glaring fiercely at the warrior.

"I heard. But *where is the other one*?" Shattersweep lowered his head, snarling with such force at Onyxpaw that even the desensitized apprentice jumped back. "She said she'd meet me at the gathering! How am I supposed to know where she is?" the scrawny black cat hissed.

"I'll go fetch her." Shattersweep grumbled as he took off through the crowd.

"Mother? Sister? Are you really CliffClan cats now?" Galepaw rushed forwards, burying his face in Snowspirit's thick white fur. "But why did you leave? I've been worrying about you ever since you disappeared!"

He wailed something else, but Twisterpaw had turned her attention to her silent sister. "Magpiepaw... why?" she managed, stepping towards the gray-and-white tabby. Her sister shied away, casting her gaze down and pressing her shoulder even more tightly against her mother's flank. "Um... Mother told me to?" she mumbled.

"So? Are you joining, or what?" Onyxpaw snapped, inching closer.

"What?! No! Why would I?" Twisterpaw said hotly, whirling around to face her sister.

"Because my warrior's assessment is a little bit more... engaged

than the usual CliffClan assessment." Onyxpaw said, arching her back threateningly. "Instead of some kind of hunting or fighting assignment, I'm going to set out to reunite all of my siblings who were unfortunately scattered around the Clans during the war between ForestClan and WoodClan." she said menacingly.

"Snowspirit brought us Magpiepaw already. And I guess Galepaw refused to come with them, since he's still in ForestClan." Onyxpaw thrust her muzzle in the dark gray tom's direction.

"I thought we were going hunting!" Galepaw sniffled, muffled by his mother's white fur.

"Anyways, I was assigned to come get you. But apparently you've been trained well for a non-StoneClan cat. After I was disgraced by my failure, I convinced our other sister to meet us at the next gathering." the black cat explained.

"Other sister?" Twisterpaw echoed, feeling her anger being replaced with more confusion.

At that moment, the pale gray-and-black warrior returned. "I got her. She even brought a gift for us." Shattersweep boasted. Behind him, carrying a mouse, was Possumpaw.

"Possumpaw... you're our sister?" Twisterpaw stared at the light gray tabby. She vaguely remembered Galepaw telling her about the slender black she-cat being spotted in MeadowClan. That had to have been Onyxpaw talking to the apprentice.

"Yes. I was hinting at it, but before I could talk to you I was-" Possumpaw was cut off by Snowspirit's yowl of joy.

"Daughter!" the white she-cat raced forwards, pulling the quiet apprentice into an embrace. Galepaw was left, stunned, standing on the pebbles. His eyes were brimming with tears.

"Wait. How many siblings do I have?" Twisterpaw turned back to Onyxpaw.

"Well, there's you and me. Then there's Magpiepaw and Brightpaw, plus Possumpaw. That makes five of us. Right? I can become a

warrior now?" Onyxpaw suddenly gazed up at Shattersweep, who had returned to loom over his apprentice. "My assessment is over, right? I passed?"

"No. There's one more. But it's up to you to find out who it is." Shattersweep said gruffly.

Onyxpaw let out a furious snarl. "Seriously?!"

She clawed at the ground, her dark blue eyes sparkling in the light of the full moon. Suddenly, another CliffClan cat walked over. This one was a blue-gray she-cat with intensely yellow eyes. Twisterpaw immediately recognized the mysterious CliffClan deputy, Shardclaw. The fuzzy cat was shorter than Shattersweep, but the fearsome warrior showed much respect to the deputy.

"Hello, Shardclaw. What-"

"Did you get Possumpaw?" the blue-gray cat snapped impatiently.

"Yes, but-"

"That's all we need. Our work is done here." the deputy waved her tail at the rest of the CliffClan patrol. "Let's move out!" she called sharply. Quartzstar pricked his ears at the yowl, then leaped off of the bench. The warriors and elders immediately began flowing towards the break in the clearing.

"Wait! Mother!" Galepaw cried, catching Snowspirit's fluffy tail with his paw.

"Galepaw, you can come if you want. But you won't be able to turn back. CliffClan apprentices aren't usually allowed at gatherings, so if you want to see your sisters any time soon, you'll come with us." his mother said gently. "We would love to have you in CliffClan."

"Don't do it, Galepaw! You have no idea what you're getting in to!" Twisterpaw begged. Onyxpaw looked as if her training involved being beaten up four times a day, plus being starved and sleep-deprived to the fullest extent. She didn't want to risk her brother going through that.

"I'm sorry, Twisterpaw. You don't miss them like I do. I need them in my life." Galepaw turned away, following the CliffClan cats out of the clearing.

"No!" Twisterpaw wailed. But it was too late. Her brother had already disappeared into the crowd, along with the other mysterious CliffClan warriors.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"I can't believe this! You're just going to let him walk away to another Clan?" Twisterpaw protested.

Shadowsweep shrugged again. "As his mentor, I'm fine with it." she said simply. "Now, scram. You're blocking my view." Twisterpaw turned away from the ForestClan warriors. Everyone she asked had told her it was his decision, after all. She hung her head defeatedly as she approached the other apprentices.

"Hey, have you seen Possumpaw and Galepaw?" Lemmingpaw asked.

"They left with CliffClan. And... I think Possumpaw is my sister. I don't know. It's all very confusing." Twisterpaw blurted.

"It must be something to do with the healers. Possumpaw wanted to be a healers' apprentice, and Galepaw is one. Maybe-" Adderpaw was cut off by Pumpkinpaw's excited twittering.

"Wow! Who were those cats, Twisterpaw? And why did your brother leave with them?" she demanded.

Twisterpaw put a paw to her head, not wanting to deal with the enthusiastic she-cat. "Sorry, Pumpkinpaw. I'll tell you later. It's a lot to process right now." she shuffled a few steps before spotting Gillpaw and Caribоupaw, the newest apprentice of GroveClan. The two were talking quietly with each other, sitting on a tall boulder on the edge of the cluster of dark green bushes that the apprentices usually claimed during the gatherings.

"Hey, you two. How's it going over here?" Twisterpaw smiled at the two quiet, pale gray cats. She needed to get away from her regular friends, who were bound to ask questions. But Oriolepaw and her rambunctious peers were way too loud. The two apprentices nodded at her politely. "We were just talking about the WoodClan apprentice Plumpaw. They haven't showed up for a few gatherings

in a row, and Lemonspice said they were being punished. But you've meet Caribou paw, haven't you? They were at the last gathering." Gillpaw tilted his head at the cat beside him.

"Hello, Twisterpaw... How is Brightpaw? You mentioned something about him the last time I saw you." Caribou paw asked softly.

"He's great." Twisterpaw said, settling onto a smaller rock below the two toms. "He got in a fight with his mentor a while ago, and he's stuck in the camp tonight. But I'm sure you'll be able to meet him at the next gathering." she detailed.

"Ah, yes. He sounds... loud." Caribou paw tilted their head oddly.

"You don't like loud cats?"

"I don't know. My two siblings, Deerpaw and Fawnpaw... are quite... energetic." Caribou paw paused periodically, as if he was searching his brain for the right words to say. "I was told I'm more like Wolfstride... Doespeckle's mate."

Twisterpaw sat up suddenly. Caribou paw was referring to his parents as if they weren't his own, wasn't he? And his pale gray pelt contrasted with his siblings' dusky brown colors. But at the same time, he looked exactly like his supposed father, Wolfstride. She briefly wondered if Caribou paw was training in the Frozen Forest, but quickly dismissed the thought. The young apprentice looked soft and cuddly, much unlike the ferocious and muscular cats that trained in the shadows. But could he be the lost sibling?

For a moment, Twisterpaw glanced down at her front legs. She wasn't as muscular as the other apprentices she knew trained in the Frozen Forest, but still...

"Who is your mentor?" Caribou paw pricked his ears towards her.

"Crowpelt. But he hasn't been to a gathering with me... ever, actually. He didn't teach me the basics, but he's really good at battle training. Has your mentor taught you battle training?" Twisterpaw poked around for any information signaling that they were training in the Frozen Forest.

"Well... Wolfstride is my mentor... but... all he's taught me is hunting. And how to walk through dreams, for some reason..."

"You mean, walking in your dreams?"

"Uh... I don't know. It's weird."

"You mean you dream, and then you walk through it and visualize a place you want to go, and then you end up there?"

"Yeah. That."

Twisterpaw sat back, surprised. In the Frozen Forest, she had learned how to walk into the mist and visualize where she wanted to travel to. When she stepped out of it, she would be there. It was now undeniable that Cariboupaw had been training in the Frozen Forest.

"So, Twisterpaw..."

Gillpaw's voice startled the black-and-white apprentice. The pale gray tom was so quiet, she had forgotten he was perched a tail-length from Cariboupaw. "Have you ever been outside ForestClan borders, aside from gatherings?" the tom asked, striking up a conversation.

"Well... no, not really."

"Can you swim."

"Oh, yes! I have to be dragged out of the water, it's so fun!"

"How far can you swim?"

"I've been practicing, and I can swim the entire lake border of ForestClan.Pretty impressive, right."

Gillpaw sat back for a moment. "I suppose so. DeltaClan and MeadowClan cats swim to get to the island. Can you fish?" he narrowed his eyes considerably.

"Um... I guess not. We have fish in the shallows, but I haven't

caught any." Twisterpaw recalled.

"No, I mean real fishing. Like, diving for fish in the middle of the lake."

Twisterpaw blinked rapidly. "DeltaClan cats swim out to the middle of the lake and catch fish?" she was surprised. "Can you do that?"

"I'm currently learning how, but it's lonely with only Finpaw to keep me entertained. He won't learn how to fish until a few more moons. I was wondering if you'd like to meet on the smaller island and fish with me tomorrow night. Not in a romantic way. I'm just bored." Gillpaw offered.

"Sure!" Twisterpaw leaped to her feet enthusiastically, nearly tumbling off of her rock.She suddenly drew her head back, remembering Cariboupaw's presence. "I'm sure you can come too, Cariboupaw." she ducked her head, mildly embarrassed.

The pale gray cat shook their head. "No thanks. But why don't you go ask an apprentice from MeadowClan? Sometimes they fish, too." they suggested.

Twisterpaw nodded, jumping off of the rock and slowly padding towards the other apprentices. Shrewpaw and Volepaw were from MeadowClan. Maybe they knew how to swim. But secretly, she hoped they didn't. An outing alone with Gillpaw could teach her valuable skills, but she could also learn valuable information.

Gillpaw could be her lost brother, couldn't he?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Cats of all Clans, please lend us your ears! The gathering has begun!" Sequoiastar yowled from her perch on the bench. Twisterpaw scrambled for a place to sit. She was passing by her GroveClan friend when Lemmingpaw caught her eye. The dark brown she-cat smiled and patted the grass beside her, urging her to sit down.

Twisterpaw quickly took her place next to her friend and looked around. Adderpaw had wandered off to sit with Oriolepaw and her band. Only her and Lemmingpaw remained in the open space between the two tallest bushes. Twisterpaw settled down into the long grass, hoping her punishment wasn't going to be the first priority.

"I said, lend us your ears!" The reddish WoodClan leader snapped at Oriolepaw and Adderpaw, who were still fooling around. The rowdy apprentices eventually sat down, gazing up at the seven leaders who were waiting patiently, pretending not to see the young cats' mischief. Mostly. Sedgestar was glaring at everyone like he normally did, but he was focused more on the apprentices this time.

"WoodClan has been welcoming the warmer weather. Our only news is a recent sighting of raccoons on our territory. They quickly moved on, but we advise cats near our territory to keep an eye out, especially around the twoleg dens where they scavenge." Sequoiastar reported.

"Yes, yes. MireClan has also prospered. The recent storms have flooded a few of our hunting grounds, but the dried-up pond has been revived. We look forward to fishing in the shallows, if the greenleaf does not dry up the land like it did last time." Sedgestar said quickly. The old tom nodded at Claystar. "Has the flooding affected DeltaClan?" he prodded spontaneously.

Claystar sat up suddenly, clearly at a loss for words. The leader wasn't skilled at speaking, and struggled for a moment to answer.

"Uh... yes, Sedgestar. Unfortunately, our nursery flooded during a particularly terrible storm. Two of Dewdrop and Salmonscale's kits, Algaekit and Leechkit, were swept away. The oldest one, Tadpolekit, remains in critical condition." Claystar said nervously. He bowed his head humbly. "We mourn for our losses." he finished.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Claystar." Ospreystar assured him, although his voice was emotionless as ever. "ConiferClan has not suffered any losses, although my deputy Kestrelspeckle was on a patrol during a storm when a cluster of pine needles fell and hit her in the face. Her eye was moderately injured. Some infection set in, presumably from the mud, and she has not been well enough to attend this gathering." the brown-and-white tom lashed his long tail at Owlfeather, who sat on the deputies' ledge.

The long-furred, ginger-and-white tom was Oriolepaw's father and mentor. He was the oldest warrior in ConiferClan, too. Twisterpaw had learned from the two siblings' bragging that they were entitled to authority, since their mentors were the deputy and senior warrior of their Clan.

Now, Barleystar interrupted the consideration of the ConiferClan deputy's injury. "Well, enough sad news. MeadowClan has been enjoying this rain! I mean, the grass nearly blocks out the sun! Anyways, on to the important part. As you recall, my deputy was expecting kits with yours truly. Flaxfur is standing in for her today because MeadowClan has four new kits!" he announced triumphantly. Only a few cats cheered, but Barleystar still grinned widely. "Their names are Rabbitkit, Foxkit, Hawkkit, and Coyotekit!" he finished dramatically.

"New kits are always a cause for celebration." Sandystar began. "ForestClan has a few new apprentices: Amberpaw, Mosspaw, and Thornpaw. Aside from that, Dovetail has become a permanent queen and Sprucefall, Cedarspike, and Pinebristle have retired. Unfortunately, Ravenflight has drowned while visiting the Moonpond. We will mourn the loss of our beloved senior healer." she reported.

She paused to let the reactions die down. "As you can see, I am the new leader. To clear up any rumors, Poppystar did not die from a

falling tree branch, nor did she catch a case of frostcough. Twisterpaw may provide information as to her cause of death." the she-cat turned her head to peer down at the apprentice, who was cowering in the thick grass. All eyes turned to Twisterpaw as cats from seven Clans waited for her response.

"Poppystar was slain by her brother, a kittypet called Mango. He tricked his way into the camp and murdered her as revenge for an event that happened long ago." Twisterpaw said simply, sitting up tall. If she was going to admit her involvement in her leader's death, she shouldn't be hiding in the foliage.

"Go on. Who led the former warrior into the camp?" Mothtail called from her perch beside the other deputies.

"Um..." Twisterpaw felt the wight of the confession sinking in. She lowered her head under the stares of the crowd. "Well... That may have been me..."

"It was me!" a voice rang out through the clearing. Many cats turned to stare at the fluffy ginger tabby who stood out from Oriolepaw, Adderpaw, Applepaw, and Wrenpaw. "It's all my fault!" Pumpkinpaw yowled. "Don't blame Twisterpaw! It was me!"

The black-and-white she-cat stared in shock. Pumpkinpaw was taking the blame for her?!

"Go on, Pumpkinpaw." Sandystar nodded at the young tabby.

"Mango tried to get me to help him kill Poppystar. He wouldn't have done it otherwise. I felt bad for him because he was so angry. He wasn't going to do it if I wasn't going to back him up. I didn't think he was actually going to murder someone, and wanted me to be a part of it. But I trusted that shady cat. It is, truly, my fault." Pumpkinpaw's voice was genuine. She was telling the truth.

Sandystar waved her tail to calm the violent whispering that followed. "Thank you, Pumpkinpaw, for clearing that up. I was not aware of... that side of the story." she turned to Pikastar beside her. "That is all of the news ForestClan has to offer. What about you, Pikastar?"

The dark brown GroveClan leader said something about their healer's three new kits, but Twisterpaw was still in shock. Why had Pumpkinpaw pinned the blame on herself? Did Mango really try to get her help in the murder of Poppystar?

But still, she had bigger questions. She wasn't even focusing on the leaders anymore, thinking deeply about the recent events. Surely all of this would make sense eventually. But until then, everything seemed very out of order.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Pumpkinpaw!" Twisterpaw called, springing to her feet. "I need to talk to you!"

The fluffy apprentice bounced away from the rest of the returning dawn patrol. "Yes? What is it?" she asked brightly.

"Why didn't you tell me Mango was trying to-"

"You want to know about that? It's all in the past now, Twisterpaw. I'm not worrying about my kittypet life anymore. I just want to think about my new friends now, okay?" Pumpkinpaw cut her off, tilting her head sharply.

"Oh. Sure." Twisterpaw backed up a few steps. Her tabby companion gave her a smile and sprang off, rejoining her mentor near the camp entrance.

The black-and-white apprentice sighed slightly, still conflicted about the events of the night before. She thought for a moment, considering asking Mousefall or Cardinalheart about her mixed feelings, but remembered that they were on the southern border patrol. Twisterpaw shook out her pelt in an attempt to fully wake up. Crowpelt would be asleep until at least midmorning, so she should use her free time wisely.

She turned her paws towards the camp entrance. Maybe hunting would clear her name of all the confusion.

"Hello? Gillpaw?" Twisterpaw whispered loudly. The island was small, so surely the pale gray tom would be able to hear her. "Are you there?"

"You look... tired. Was the swim over too hard for you?" Gillpaw said plainly, startling Twisterpaw. He had been almost concealed by

the lush grass, as only his head was slightly visible. His dark blue eyes glittered hauntingly in the light of the almost-full moon, staring at her intensely.

"I made it here just fine, for your information." The she-cat snapped, but immediately regretted it. "I mean, yes. I managed."

"That's good. Shall we?" Gillpaw edged towards the edge of the island, where the grass ended in a steep decline to the black water below. It had taken extra effort for Twisterpaw to drag herself up the sudden rise. Now, she stared at the water, which seemed even more unforgiving than usual. Except for a few reflections of moonlight, the surface was completely dark.

The small tom leaped far off into the water, making only the tiniest splash. Soon, his head poked out of the abyss. "Are you coming in?" he prodded.

"Of course." Twisterpaw tried not to sound irritated at the thought of another cold swim. She sprang off the edge of the island, making a giant splash that seemed to echo around the valley.

"Wow. I think you woke up Thistlestar all the way in RockClan." Gillpaw commented.

"Oh, hush, you." Twisterpaw said through gritted teeth. The water felt infinitely more cold than it had been a few heartbeats ago, when she first swam away from the ForestClan shore. Now, as she followed the DeltaClan apprentice away from the island, the black water seemed to steal the warmth of her pelt. "Is is just me, or is it getting colder?" she asked.

"It's definitely colder down at the bottom, but maybe it just feels like that because we're getting into open water." Gillpaw explained, not looking back.

"So, you do this often? Doesn't it take practice to be able to swim for this long?" Twisterpaw felt uneasy. She had barely survived the swim to the island. How was she supposed to stay afloat for this long?

"If you start drowning, I'll save you. Not in a romantic way, though. I don't do romance." Gillpaw said flatly as he halted in the water. "This should be far enough. Have you been diving before?"

"Um... At sunhigh I go diving for shells to eat sometimes. I usually do it for Brightpaw, who hates the water. He can't swim." Twisterpaw recalled.

"Can you hold your breath?"

"Only twice as long as my own mentor- who just happens to be the senior warrior of ForestClan!"

Gillpaw looked unimpressed, his steely face bobbing unreadably in the black water. "It's simple. You take a deep breath and dive down as deep as you can. If you see a fish, try to catch it and go for the throat. Then, you carry it back to the island. Usually we have a cat keep watch over the pile, but I don't think anything will attack us tonight. Just keep an eye out for otters and other beasts." with that, the tom disappeared into the void.

A few moments later, Twisterpaw paddled downward into the cold darkness. At first she didn't see anything, but soon she spotted a school of small fish sheltering under an ancient branch that was coated in particles of debris. She raced down and raked her claws across the branch, sending mud flying about. Many fish swam past her, but she managed to catch one.

At the surface, she examined it. Fish were a lot bigger than she thought- this one was about half the length of her foreleg! It flopped around, making loud splashes as she tried to control it. Eventually, she bit deep enough into its throat so that it stopped struggling. The blood tasted... weird. Not unpleasant, but very unfamiliar.

"You got one?" Gillpaw mumbled around a giant, dark gray fish he was carrying.

"Yeah." Twisterpaw managed, shivering in her soaking-wet pelt.

"We should probably go back to the island to start a pile." Gillpaw

suggested. Without waiting for any confirmation from his friend, he turned and glided off into the night. Twisterpaw raced to keep up, barely keeping her head above the water. It was an even greater accomplishment to drag herself up the bank of the tiny island.

"You look tired." Gillpaw commented, standing over the heavily panting she-cat. "Maybe you should catch your breath... How about you guard the fish? I'll be back with more." he offered.

"Alright." Twisterpaw said, mildly irritated. Gillpaw just wanted her to feel useful while he did the hard work. But if she stayed out of the water until she got her breath back, she could avoid a more dangerous situation- particularly where Gillpaw would have to save her from drowning.

Twisterpaw turned back to the two fish that lay motionless in the dense grass. The island only had a pawful of trees, which were too smooth to climb. Other than that, the only scenery was the thick grass that covered everything. The black-and-white apprentice paced around as she waited for her pale gray friend to return, leaving a circular trail in the foliage.

Suddenly, she picked up an unfamiliar scent. It was DeltaClan, no doubt, but definitely not Gillpaw. She pricked her ears towards the distant shores, but no sound of any cat could be heard. The apprentice worriedly turned her head in Gillpaw's direction to see him paddling over, carrying a nearly-white fish.

"You look concerned." he remarked as he gracefully slithered into the thick grass.

"I smelled a DeltaClan scent. But not you." Twisterpaw reported, feeling the already-spiky fur on the back of her neck begin to bristle.

"Keep a nose out, then. I don't smell anything, but maybe that's because DeltaClan cats' unique scent can mask that of our Clanmates." Gillpaw informed simply. He glanced around the island quickly before turning and disappearing into the water once again.

As a slight breeze was blowing, Twisterpaw bushed out her tail.

The scent was absolutely on the island. Any one of the small DeltaClan cats could easily sneak onto the... Wait. What if Gillpaw had lead her here to leave her alone on the island, all vulnerable? He could be her long-lost sibling, plotting a trap for Onyxpaw to kidnap her and-

"Ouch!" a tiny voice cried. Twisterpaw leaped back, startled.

"Who's there?" she snapped.

A dark grayish-brown kit stepped into the light of the almost-full moon. "It's just me. But seriously, watch where you're going. What if you stepped on my head rather than my tail?" they squeaked.

"Wha- What's a little kit like you doing out here, all alone?" Twisterpaw bent down to inspect the kit as they strode forwards, showing no sign of fear.

"I'm Algaekit. A few days ago, I was carried here by a branch. But... who are you? And what are you doing with Gillpaw? Have you come to look for me and Leechkit?"

"I'm fishing with a friend. But no, we weren't looking for you two." Twisterpaw explained.

"Oh." the dark kit looked sorrowful. "I guess Leechkit was right. They really did forget about us."

"Wha- Oh, no. I'm sure they've been looking all over for you. Claystar announced it at the gathering, too." Twisterpaw reasoned, trying to sound comforting.

At that moment, Gillpaw materialized from the water. "Twisterpaw? Who are you talking to?" he questioned, even quieter than usual.

"Come over here, Gillpaw!" Twisterpaw hissed. "I found the missing kits!"

"My babies! My precious babies!" Dewdrop purred contently at the two young kits. Algaekit and Leechkit were curled up at her side. The dark kits were fast asleep in heartbeats, cuddling into

Dewdrop's soft fur.

"I can't thank you enough." the gray she-cat gazed up at Gillpaw and Twisterpaw, who were standing in the entrance to the nursery with the healer Turtleswirl and the deputy, Shalestreak.

"Is there anything we can do to repay you? Would you like to bring some prey back to your Clan?" Shalestreak proposed. "Or you can come back later and we'd be happy to give some live shells to plant on your shores."

"Oh, no. I couldn't." Twisterpaw declined, still trying to place her paws in the crowded nursery.

"Are you sure?" Turtleswirl prodded gently. "I have some extra herbs I'm not using right now. If Moonsweep or Sagepool need any-"

"I'm sure." Twisterpaw nodded firmly. "We don't need anything, thanks."

"In that case, DeltaClan owes ForestClan a favor. Thank you." Shalestreak dipped her head. The grayish-brown she-cat gave a slight smile. "Anytime you need anything, just ask."

"Oh... Thanks!" Twisterpaw stumbled, trying to find the right words.

"Mother! I'm telling you, ForestClan is invading!" A shrill voice shrieked.

"Settle down, Snailkit. She's a nice cat, who brought back Leechkit and Algaekit." Shellridge soothed the rambunctious youngster, who was trying to leap out of his nest. "Sorry. He hasn't seen any cat outside of DeltaClan." the queen said, mildly embarrassed.

"Ah, yes. He reminds me of my brother." Twisterpaw recounted.

Chapter Thirty

"What do you mean, he isn't coming back?" Twisterpaw demanded.

"He wants to stay in CliffClan. Wise choice, if you ask me." Onyxpaw shrugged apathetically. "So, are you going to join him?"

"Does he miss me? Do any of them miss me?"

"No."

Twisterpaw glared down at her paws, infuriated. Her family was truly slipping out of her reach now. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the scrawny black she-cat padding away to join the other CliffClan apprentices. Twisterpaw stood up, shaking the fictional frost from her pelt as she turned around to scan the white rocks for her mentor.

Crowpelt was sitting on the tallest boulder, talking to Wolfstride. But before Twisterpaw even took a step in his general direction, he turned his head to stare into her soul. After a few awkward heartbeats, he gracefully hopped down from his perch and waded through the dense foliage towards her.

"Hello, Twisterpaw. You did well in training tonight." he commented simply.

"Yes, but do you think-"

"Is your family not perfect?" Crowpelt tilted his head suddenly, ready to pounce on any answer she gave.

"Well... I don't know." Twisterpaw admitted.

"I'd like to introduce you to someone." Crowpelt said, turning towards a cloud of mist. He waved his tail, beckoning her to follow. Twisterpaw glanced around quickly, studying the cats. She knew all of the apprentices that trained in the Frozen Forest, plus the warriors who trained them. But she had only met a pawful of spirits before...

"Who is it?" she ventured, her voice setting off many echoes in the mist.

"You have not seen this cat, but you have heard much about him. A cat from ForestClan, too." Crowpelt hinted.

"Um... Is it Pumastar? Or was his name Cougarstar? That leader?" Twisterpaw guessed.

"No, but I will give you one more hint. He's still alive."

Twisterpaw racked her brain trying to think of someone, but eventually one answer flickered through. "Um... my father? One of those cats that were exiled from ForestClan when I was a kit?"

"Correct." Crowpelt smiled slightly, revealing his long, snow-white fangs.

The pair stepped through the mist, and into a ring of black, twisted trees. Standing in the grass were a cluster of cats Twisterpaw had never seen before. A pale tabby she-cat with amber eyes rushed forwards, snarling at them. Twisterpaw leaped out of her way, cowering in the grass as the she-cat raced by her. "Well? Can I see them now?" she demanded.

"I haven't talked to Robinsong recently, but a while ago she said Squirrelstrike was working on it. Soon you'll be seeing Mousefall." Crowpelt said coldly.

"How soon?" the she-cat snarled.

"He has only been here once, but we should be able to convince him in a while."

"And how long will *that* take?" the tabby's voice was rising.

"Calm down, Twistedbramble. Maybe we could visit during the day?" A grayish-brown tom stepped through the mist, laying his slender tail on Twistedbramble's shoulder.

Twistedbramble whipped her head around to growl at Crowpelt. "You told me I'd see them before they became warriors!" she yowled furiously.

"Maybe Ratchaser has a point." Crowpelt held up a dark gray paw. "Since Mousefall is showing resistance to our plan, maybe we should change a minor detail. I propose we bring the siblings to us, but in the waking world."

"That's what I suggested moons ago! I swear, do you guys ever listen to me?" Twistedbramble hissed.

"But wouldn't that make it harder? We want to see them often, and in their dreams. Wouldn't it be dangerous to make them come all the way to us?" Ratchaser reasoned.

"Why don't we focus on the one we have now?" an even colder voice cut through the mist. "There's another father who's *so* desperate to see his children." The two cats parted to make way for a tall, dark gray tabby tom. He smiled down at Twisterpaw, who was still huddled in the foliage. "I've been waiting so long to finally meet you." he purred.

The young apprentice shied back, flattening her ears. "Don't come any closer!" she hissed. "Who are you, and what do you want?" The dark gray tom raised his head, only showing a slight edge of second-guessing. "Well, I'm Darkcloud. Your father, as you know. And don't believe a single word of what the old ForestClan warriors think of me."

Twisterpaw un-arched her back, but only inched forwards a few paw-lengths. "Alright, but who are these cats?" she said, glaring at him fiercely.

"These two lovebirds are Ratchaser and Twistedbramble. And those three back there..." he flicked his tail at three tabbies behind him. "Those are their kits from a previous litter."

Upon further inspection, they looked quite different from each other. From afar, they had looked almost the same. "Which one is which?" Twisterpaw said cautiously. Darkcloud craned his neck behind him for a moment, considering. "Well, one with ginger spots is Snakelash. And the tom with white points is Viperstrike. And his ginger-ish brother is Rattleshake." he detailed.

"Okay... but what are they talking about, what with Mousefall and Squirrelstrike?"

At that point, Twistedbramble broke in. "When we got exiled, I was separated from two of my kits, who are now warriors! Crowpelt promised I'd get to reunite with them in the Frozen Forest, but it's been moons since the both of them were here together. I just want my family to be reunited..." her voice was sharp, but grew softer. "Especially since Marmotkit ran away on our first night away from ForestClan."

"Alright, enough moaning about your kits. Crowpelt here tells me that Magpiepaw and Galepaw went off to join CliffClan. What's that about?" Darkcloud said ominously.

"Uh..." Twisterpaw looked back at Crowpelt, who nodded coldly. "Well... I was at the last gathering a while back, and I met Onyxpaw. She's the cat that attacked me. It turns out she was trying to get me to join CliffClan with my sister and mother, as her warrior's assessment was to reunite Snowspirit's litter that was separated during the war between ForestClan and WoodClan. Oh, and also Possumpaw from MeadowClan is my sister."

"I already know that." Darkcloud prodded with a hint of impatience.

"Um... Galepaw decided to join them. Brightpaw is still in ForestClan, but-"

"Tell me something I don't know."

"...There's another sibling that Onyxpaw has to bring back before she becomes a warrior. I think it might be Gillpaw from DeltaClan or Cariboupaw from GroveClan." Twisterpaw recounted.

"Interesting." Darkcloud looked back once more to Twistedbramble and Ratchaser's kits, who nodded in agreement. "I'll look into that. Thank you for that little tidbit of information."

"Can I go now, Darkcloud?" Twisterpaw said, already backing into the mist. The dark gray tom shook his head, frowning. "If you would like, Twisterpaw. But please, do visit me."

The apprentice nodded, although she internally growled at the commitment.

Twisterpaw was licking the remains of a vole from her muzzle when she first heard the screeching. She pricked her ears at the camp entrance, while beside her Brightpaw shot to his feet. "What's that? Is ForestClan being invaded?" he snarled enthusiastically, digging his claws into the dry, early-greenleaf dirt.

The morning hunting patrol raced into camp, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed. Daisyshine was the first one in, looking around frantically. A deep scratch dripped blood from her shoulder as she spotted Sandystar rushing towards her.

"Daisyshine? What's going on?" The leader worried, trotting over with her fur standing on end.

Mothtail nearly barreled into the young warrior as she scrambled over to her leader. "Sandystar! Our patrol was attacked by MireClan warriors!" the deputy thundered. Cats were gathering now, concern spreading through their murmering. The other three cats on the hunting patrol managed to pant out a story as Sandystar listened intently. Squirrelstrike was covered in scratches, while Lilyspring had only one wound on the upper part of her foreleg.

Twisterpaw crouched down, observing as her brother sprang away to bombard his mentor Parsleyshade with questions. The queen was distraught, shaking her head as if in disbelief.

"Cats of ForestClan, settle down!" Sandystar yowled, standing between the roots of the leader's tree. Once she had everyone's attention, she leaped up the trunk and balanced on the lowest branch to peer out at the warriors below.

"Mothtail tells me her hunting patrol was catching frogs on the MireClan border when six cats attacked them. Were you on MireClan territory?" Sandystar turned to face her deputy, who was dutifully perched on her boulder.

"No, Sandystar! It was unprovoked!" the pale tabby roared.

"Was anyone hurt?"

"All of us- but Dovetail was slain by their queen, Heathflower!"

Shocked yowls filled the camp, some cats bowing their heads in respect for the fallen queen. Mothtail's golden eyes burned with rage at her sister's death. She gritted her teeth, no doubt planning her revenge against the MireClan deputy.

"This calls for an attack!" Sandystar growled, shaking her head in grief. "What do you propose, Mothtail?"

The deputy curled her tail in, studying the cats for a long moment. "We should wait until nightfall. Then, we'll teach them the importance of queens. We'll be paying the MireClan nursery a visit tonight." she snarled maliciously.

"I can't believe this! We're actually going on a raid!" Brightpaw nearly squeaked.

Twisterpaw gave the white tom a glare. "You shouldn't be excited. You might have to kill a cat on this mission."

"*Might* kill a cat? We're doing battle!"

"You heard the senior warriors. It's a stealth mission. We won't have to fight anyone unless something goes wrong." Twisterpaw reasoned.

Brightpaw kept pacing excitedly around the boulders by the elders' den. Quickly tiring of watching and waiting for the sun to set, Twisterpaw crept around him to where Mothtail was talking to three elderly toms.

"I myself may not make it back due to my age. But if you wish to

come with us, I won't stop you." Mothtail was saying.

"Of course we will. It would be better for us to go with you in case anything goes wrong and you only have those young warriors to protect you." Sprucefall said solemnly, dipping his head.

Mothtail straightened up, giving the three former warriors a nod. "Very well, then. I suggest you take some herbs before you go." she commanded. Twisterpaw edged away from Cedarspike and Pinebristle as they trotted towards the healers' den. She gave Sprucefall a small smile as the old tom passed by.

"Brightpaw, Twisterpaw! I need to talk to you!" A shrill voice suddenly rang through her ears. Twisterpaw turned around to see Pumpkinpaw racing out of the healers' den. Brightpaw immediately stopped his pacing and leapt to her side, ears pricked forwards. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Basilfang sent me to tell you that Parsleyshade is having her kits!" Pumpkinpaw rushed.

"Wha- Already?" Brightpaw's eyes widened. "So... she's not coming on the mission, is she?"

Pumpkinpaw gave a slight smile. "No, and Crowpelt is staying here to guard the camp. But both of them agreed that this mission will be your warriors' assessments!"

At that moment, a low yowl sounded from the camp entrance. Mothtail was swishing her tail, gathering a few chosen warriors around her. "Are you ready? You better be." she snarled. "We leave now!"

Twisterpaw could handle the chilly water several paw-lengths deep, but the mud was unbearable. It squished beneath her toes and squirmed in her thick fur as she followed behind Brightpaw and the rest of the patrol through the dark swamp. Mothtail and Robinsong were leading, with Daisyshine trailing behind to talk with the three elders.

"So, you're coming out of retirement to fight MireClan... But you're

not warriors again?" the cream-colored she-cat prodded.

Sprucefall nodded gravely. "Just in case you need us senior warriors if anything goes wrong." he confirmed. "Nothing more."

"I told you to quit asking questions, Daisyshine." Mothtail whispered from up ahead. "We're getting close to the camp. Someone could hear us."

Twisterpaw pricked her ears to the shadows up ahead. In the light of the half-moon, the outlines of two MireClan cats could be seen guarding the rocky circle that was the camp. Brambles and branches had been woven into a wall that had been covered in mud to make it stronger. Twisterpaw admired it as she crept closer.

Mothtail waved her fluffy tail suddenly, crouching against a small hole in the wall. "Twisterpaw!" she hissed. "The nursery is right there, between these two rocks and under the roof made of grass. You're the smallest cat, so you have a better chance of squeezing in. I need you to go to the other side and make the hole bigger." she commanded.

Twisterpaw nodded, stepping forwards. "Sure." she agreed dutifully. The apprentice squeezed her head through the wall, just barely fitting her shoulders. She gave one shove and fell through, landing in the soft moss. The nursery smelled like her kithood, although it was drenched in MireClan scent.

There was one queen, which Twisterpaw recognized as Heathflower. Her four five-moon-old kits were curled deeply into her fur, fast asleep.

She turned around and began to claw at the strands of twigs and grass that poked through the mud. Once the hole was big enough, Mothtail squeezed her shoulders through. "Dig into it a little more." she snapped, her hot breath invading Twisterpaw's nostrils.

"Alright, alright. I will." Twisterpaw waited for the deputy to back away before she pawed at the hole once more. Her muddy claws had already gained many blades of grass between them, but she still worked furiously against the mud. "Is that good?" she asked the she-

cat, who was intently watching from outside.

"Yeah, yeah." Mothtail managed her front half through. Twisterpaw stepped back to make more room, but she felt fluffy fur beneath her hind paw. She turned around to see Heathflower's golden eyes staring back at her. The queen's head shot up, and she coiled back, hissing wildly.

"ForestClan!" she yowled. "ForestClan is attacking!"

Mothtail shot through the wall, wrapping her front paws around the queen's neck. She bit down on the brown tabby's throat, silencing her cry for help. The four kits blinked in confusion, stumbling away. Mothtail looked up from the bloodshed, glaring at the apprentice. "What are you doing? Get them!" she snarled.

Twisterpaw stumbled back further, shocked. They were killing the killer of the deputy's sister, not slaughtering innocent kits!

The first warrior charged into the nursery, screeching wildly. Not a moment later, Mothtail was pinned beneath the paws of Toadstep, the uncle of Heathflower's kits. Another warrior, Heronfeather, followed swiftly. They were quickly met by Pinebristle and Cedarspike, who sprang into the nursery with unsheathed claws and gleaming eyes. The nursery was filled with fighting cats, and Twisterpaw was shoved into one of the rocks that made up one of the walls.

She cowered low, sheltering the two kits that had been forced back in her general direction. She wrapped her tail around the two shivering cats, who looked around in confusion. When Twisterpaw finally raised her head, she saw Pinebristle laying dead in the moss, with no sign of his brothers or any of the patrol staying around. The ForestClan cats had been defeated- all except for Mothtail.

There were three other cats in the nursery. None of them even realized she was there. One was the ForestClan deputy, still pinned down by Toadstep, with Frogfoot circling around them. "How foolish of you to break into the heart of MireClan!" Frogfoot snapped. "You must have a death wish!"

"What if I do?" the tabby retorted. "That queen stole the cat that has been my best friend for her entire life- someone innocent and undeserving, someone so close and so destined to be loved by many." she spat. "I have every right to take that from her, too."

The worst thing possible happened next. Mothtail craned her neck to glare at Twisterpaw, who still had her tail wrapped around the two kits. "Finish them, Twisterpaw!" the deputy ordered.

"...Uh..." Twisterpaw was at a loss for words. The deputy had a point that could almost half-justify her order. But still, these were innocent kits. "No. I'm sorry about your sister, but no."

Mothtail let out a furious screech, sinking her teeth into the foreleg of Toadstep. The tom responded by digging his claws into her stomach as the she-cat kicked violently with her back legs. Frogfoot had been stunned for a moment, staring at Twisterpaw. But then, he slowly stepped towards her, baring his teeth and growling dangerously.

Just as Twisterpaw was backing away from the two kits, a passionate howl erupted from the hole in the wall. A white ball of fur barreled into the warrior, knocking him off of his feet. Brightpaw latched onto Frogfoot's face, hanging on fiercely while the large tom thrashed around.

"Gah! Get off me!" the nursery was too small of a space for any of the cats to fight properly. Twisterpaw grabbed the smaller kit by the scruff and darted away, mere moments before Frogfoot crashed into the rock.

She set the kit down outside next to Heathflower, who was breathing shallowly. The gathered cats were being kept back by Marshheart's furious hissing. "Get back! She needs to breathe!" the pale tabby whirled around to face his terrified apprentice. "Don't just stand there, Batpaw! Get me some herbs!" he snapped.

Twisterpaw could only watch as the two kits, now wide awake, prodded the now-dead queen. Eventually, they accepted their predicament and sat down next to an older sibling. But where was the fourth kit? The she-cat looked around at the gathered cats, who

were giving her venomous glares. "I just want to help! Where's the other kit?" Twisterpaw managed.

One of the cats, the deputy Lizardfang, stepped forwards. "If you want to help, I suggest you remove yourself from this situation. You've done enough." they snarled coldly. Twisterpaw nodded, stepping back a few beaver-lengths before turning and springing away, back into the now-empty nursery and through the now-giant hole in the wall.

"Cats of ForestClan, settle down!" Sandystar yowled. Her tail was lashing furiously, and she flared down at the cats from her perch on the leader's branch. Her fiery amber eyes seemed to glow in the first rays of sunlight. Slowly, the cats stopped whispering and looked up at their impatient leader.

"As you may know, our deputy Mothtail led a mission to avenge her sister. Unfortunately, she and Pinebristle were slain after a fight broke out. Cedarspike was also injured, and he is currently being treated for his wounds. However, our mission was successful, and we have two apprentices who have proven themselves worthy of warriorhood." the leader reported.

Twisterpaw was nearly shoved aside as Brightpaw surged forwards to the front of the crowd. She followed more slowly, eyeing his tangled fur. The white hairs glowed in the sunrise, but his pelt wasn't in the desirable condition for a warrior's ceremony. Twisterpaw fought down the urge to smooth his pelt as she sat down next to her excited brother.

"Brightpaw, you have proven your loyalty by following the orders of your deputy and bravely fighting against MireClan. From now on, you will be known as Brightspirit. ForestClan honors you for your enthusiasm and courage." Sandystar declared.

Brightspirit smiled widely as he took in the praise. Twisterpaw tilted her head slightly, absorbing the leader's words. What had she meant by following the orders of the deputy? Mothtail hadn't said anything to him, had he? But she had run out of the den after he attacked a MireClan warrior. Anything could have happened then.

"Twisterpaw, you have proven your dedication by aiding our warriors in the raid against MireClan. From now on, you will be known as Twistertail. ForestClan honors you for your determination and honor." Ssandystar nodded at the black-and-white she-cat. Twistertail stood up in acknowledgement, but ignored the cheers from the crowd. Honor? Was that a hint to her refusal to kill the MireClan kits?

"Now, usually a new deputy would be chosen before the next sunrise or the next sunset." Sandystar changed the subject, pricking her ears towards the sun, which was casting an orange glow from between the trees. "As per tradition, the new deputy shall be Cardinalheart. He has shown his capability in mentoring as well as diplomatic matters."

The reddish tom stepped forwards as the Clan exploded in yowls of congratulations. Cardinalheart took his place on the deputy's boulder, glancing around at the Clan happily. "This gathering is dismissed. I wish you all a good night... or rather, good day." Sandystar said as she prepared to climb down from the branch.

Twistertail turned her paws towards the warriors' den as the crowd began to dissolve. It was a hollow in the wall of smooth dirt, protected partially by one of the rocks that made up a wall of the apprentices' den. Inside, the moss here was more comfortable and the nests were more spacious. Lilyspring and Mousefall were curled up inside, fast asleep.

Mousefall blinked awake as the two new warriors stepped in. "Hello, Twisterpaw. And Brightpaw, too." he purred.

"Actually, it's Brightspirit and Twistertail now!" Brightspirit chirped.

Mousefall stood up, shaking scraps of moss from his pelt. "Ah, I missed the ceremony. But you guys can have my nest, if you want. I'm going hunting." he offered, striding past them. Brightspirit nearly squeaked in excitement, leaping into the large tom's nest. Twistertail rolled her eyes at her brother's merriment, pawing together a nest from where Pinebristle and Cedarspike used to sleep.

She had been awake for so long, it was hard to think of anything but sleep. Twistertail struggled to keep her eyes open as random thoughts flashed through her mind. She hadn't talked to Crowpelt or Pumpkinpaw in a while. And hadn't Parsleyshade been kitting when they left? Oh, well. The night had been stressful for everyone. Surely she would feel much better after a good night's rest.

My apologies for the drop in quality. I wanted to move some parts into this chapter before taking a mild break. I rushed the writing to get to the thirtieth chapter on day 20 of writing this story. Thanks for reading this far!

Updated Allegiances- Act Three Part One

ForestClan:

Leader: Sandystar- Cream-and-light-brown she-cat with fiery amber eyes

Apprentice, Thornpaw

Deputy: Cardinalheart - Reddish tom, deep golden eyes

Apprentice, Finchpaw

Healers:

Shadowsweep- Black-and-white she-cat with pale blue eyes

Sagepool- Cream colored tom, pale green eyes

Apprentice, Mosspaw

Warriors:

Crowpelt- Dark gray tom with white points and light blue eyes

Robinsong- Giant reddish-orange she-cat, yellow eyes

Apprentice, Amberpaw

Basilfang- Pale tabby tom, yellow eyes

Apprentice, Pumpkinpaw

Mousefall- Large, pale tabby tom, fiery amber eyes

Apprentice, Sparrowpaw

Squirrelstrike- Dusky ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Daisyshine- Cream-colored she-cat with darker flecks, amber eyes

Lilyspring- White she-cat with pale yellow eyes, deaf in one ear

Brightspirit- White tom with black ears and paws, blue eyes

Twistertail- Black-and-white she-cat, pale green eyes

Apprentices:

Finchpaw- Cream-and-ginger tom, yellow eyes

Sparrowpaw- Reddish tom, deep golden eyes

Amberpaw- Pale tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Mosspaw- Tabby-and-white she-cat, green eyes

Thornpaw- Pale tabby-and-white tom, golden eyes

Pumpkinpaw- Large, fluffy ginger she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Queen: Parsleyshade- Ginger tabby she-cat, amber eyes

Kits:

Parsleyshade and Cardinalheart: *Thrushkit, Purslanekit, Berrykit, Rosekit*

Elders:

Pigeonwhisker

Pansypool

Nightfeather- Long-furred black tom with one white paw and intensely yellow eyes

Stormsong- Gray tabby tom with deep blue eyes

Sprucefall- Light brown tom, deep golden eyes

WoodClan:

Leader: Hazelstar- Grayish-brown she-cat with blue eyes

(Apprentice: Acornpaw)

Deputy: Strawberryspots- Reddish she-cat, amber eyes and white points

Healers:

Nettlesting- Grayish-brown she-cat, green eyes

Rootsnag- Cream colored tom, golden eyes

(Apprentice: Lentilpaw)

Warriors:

Oakfoot

Branchleg

Leafspeckle

(Apprentice: Almondpaw)

Peachpelt

Lemonspice

Limeleaf

Cherrypetal

Plumpelt

Applesprout

Apprentices:

Almondpaw

Lentilpaw

Acornpaw

Queens:

Magnoliafur

Jasmineflower

Kits:

Magnoliafur and Branchleg: *Birchkit, Beechkit, Elmkit*

Jasmineflower and Limeleaf: *Blueberrykit*

MireClan:

Leader: Sedgestar- Light brown tabby tom, golden eyes

Deputy: Lizardfang- Tortoiseshell with amber eyes

Healer: Marshheart- Pale tabby tom, golden eyes

Apprentice: Batpaw

Warriors:

Toadstep- Spotted brown tom, orange eyes

Frogfoot- Spotted light brown she-cat, golden eyes

Mudrunner- Dark brown cat, fiery amber eyes

Heronfeather- Pale gray tabby she-cat, blue eyes

Storksong- Pale gray spotted tom, green eyes

Swampspots- Tortoiseshell with pale yellow eyes

Reedstreak

Willowshade

Mapleblaze

Apprentices:

Nectarpaw

Petalpaw

Bloompaw

Pollenpaw

Batpaw- Dark grayish-brown tom, orange eyes

Beaverpaw- Dark brown cat with golden eyes

Elder: Iris-eye

MeadowClan:

Leader: Barleystar

Deputy: Blossomspots

Healer: Heatherheart

Warriors:

Flaxfur

Garlicheart

Onionleaf

Weedwhisker

Gopherspring

Quailflight

Shrewsight

Volewhisker

Kits:

Blossomspots and Barleystar: Rabbitkit, Foxkit, Hawkkit, Coyotekit

Elder: Brackenburn

RockClan:

Leader: Ivorystar

Deputy: Cricketridge

Healers:

Vinetrail

Pricklepelt

Fernflutter

Warriors:

Beetleleg

Antcrawl

Cicadaspot

Spiderstretch

Larchneedle

Hickoryroot

Juniperhitch

Lichenstripe

Queens:

Cricketridge

Waspflower

Kits:

Waspflower and Spiderstretch: *Beekit, Aphidkit*

Cricketridge and Juniperhitch: *Hollykit, Cinnamonkit, Gingerkit*

Elders:

Roachrush

Cypressrise

GroveClan

Leader: Pikastar

Deputy: Tawnyhawk

Healer: Lavendarleaf

Warriors:

Wolfstride

Lynxpounce

Elkhorn

Stagsnap

Antlertwist

Bearheart

Doespeckle

Saffronsmolder

Adderlash

Lemmingleap

Apprentices:

Deerpaw

Fawnpaw

Cariboupaw

Queens:

Tanglethicket

Moosemytrle

Kits:

Lavendarleaf and Stagnsap: *Mintkit, Dillkit, Fennelkit*

Tanglethicket and Bearheart: *Bushkit, Leafkit, Twigkit, Treekit*

Moosemyrtle and Stagsnap: *Sheepkit, Woolykit*

Elders:

Pepperpelt

Falconflight

Warblesong

DeltaClan:

Leader: Claystar

Deputy: Shalestreak

Healers:

Brindleberry

Turtleswirl

Warriors:

Salmonscale

Minnowflip

Trouttrickle

Wavecrest

Saltyrock

Flintfade

Streamspring

Shallowpool

Apprentices:

Gillpaw

Finpaw

Queens:

Shellridge

Dewdrop

Siltstripe

Kits:

Shellridge and Saltyrock: Crabkit, Tortoisekit, Snailkit

Dewdrop and Salmonscale: Leechkit, Algaekit, Clamkit

Elders:

Otterclaw

ConiferClan:

Leader: Ospreystar

Deputy: Kestrelspeckle

Healer: Mallardwhistle

Warriors:

Owlfeather

Eiderglide

Vulturestrike

Eaglespring

Kitetip

Buzzardbeak

Wrenwing

Orioleflight

Elders:

Petrelpelt

Turkeytalon

Swanclaw

Known Members of CliffClan:

Leader: Quartzstar

Deputy: Shardclaw

Healers:

Glimmermist

Apprentice: Magpiepaw

Glistershine

Dawnlight

Apprentice: Galepaw

Warriors:

Jasperstripe

Rubyrise

Shattersweep

Apprentice: Onyxpaw

Opalstone

Smokesight

Apprentice: Possumpaw

Glowheart

Lightningstripe

Lightshine

Snowspirit

Apprentices:

Onyxpaw

Magpiepaw

Galepaw

Possumpaw

Elders:

Obsidian-eye

Zirconswirl

Coalstone

Exiled:

Darkcloud

Ratchaser

Twistedbramble

Snakelash

Viperstrike

Rattleshake

Kittypets:

Pearl

Lady

Duchess

Chili

Blizzard

Strays:

Fang

Scratch

Screech

Bandit

Barn Cats:

Chase

Scramble

Paisley

Dog-pets:

Biscuit

Roxy

Rex

Grizzly

Chapter Thirty-One

Fireflies cast their lights on the leaves of the forest, glowing an ambient yellow against the thick trees of the ForestClan territory. Twistertail admired then but dared not to stray away from the patrol. A single thought slipped into her mind as she shifted her focus ahead. *Are there fireflies on the island?*

Further along, Sandystar had disappeared over the dunes, followed quickly by her deputy Cardinalheart and the junior healer Sagepool. Twistertail soon padded over the sand, eager to be among the first of the ForestClan cats to attend this gathering. To her left, she could see the GroveClan cats emerging from the strip of land between ForestClan and MireClan.

Twistertail once again turned back to the ForestClan patrol. Brightspirit, Squirrelstrike, and Lilyspring were the three warriors chosen to be representatives. Finchpaw and Pumpkinpaw also accompanied them, with Sprucefall trailing behind. The elder had fought in the raid on MireClan, but Sagepool had warned about the lingering symptoms of his bout of frostcough that had caused Twistertail and Brightspirit to attend their first gathering.

Just that evening, the healer had cautioned about the old tom putting his lungs through too much stress, but unfortunately, his cough had returned. Even though Sprucefall was desperately trying to hide it, the old tom was struggling to hike uphill into the clearing.

Twistertail put her focus on the other warriors, which made up most of the crowd. There were cats from only WoodClan and ConiferClan, but the clearing seemed to buzz with energy under the light of the full moon. Twistertail followed Mousefall through the loosely gathered cats, picking up whispers of an attack on MireClan and theories as to why Hazelshade, or Hazelstar, was sitting on the leaders' perch.

"Wha- Brightpaw? It's been moons!" A distinctive ConiferClan she-cat bounced forwards from the unfamiliar cats, greeting her brother enthusiastically.

"Oriolepaw! You've grown!" the white tom chirped. "And also, it's Brightspirit now. I'm a warrior."

"No way. I became a warrior, too! I'm Orioleflight now, and Wrenpaw's called Wrenwing now." Orioleflight

Brightspirit flicked his tail towards his sister. "She's Twistertail now."

Orioleflight tilted her head oddly. "Why?"

"Why what?" Twistertail snapped suddenly, sounding way more irritated than she actually was.

"Well, Brightspirit is obviously named after his mother. But why is your name Twistertail? And why not Twisterspirit or Twisterclaw, after your personality?"

"What personality?"

"You know. Your personality."

Twistertail startled at a sudden tail laying over her shoulder. She whirled around to see a familiar dark brown she-cat smiling welcomingly at her. "Twistertail, then. Have we met? I'm Lemmingleap, and that's my brother Adderlash bragging to all the she-cats." the new GroveClan warrior said warmly.

"That's a wild coincidence. Have all of us become warriors?" Lemmingleap looked around at Brightspirit and Orioleflight.

"No. Gillpaw and Finpaw are still apprentices, but Shrewsight and Volewhisker became warriors early. Which is weird, because they've been training for longer than you two." Orioleflight hitched her head at Twistertail and Brightspirit.

"That *is* weird. We trained for a few moons more than you guys. Why'd you become warriors?" Lemmingleap took her tail off of

Twistertail's back and studied the siblings.

"Because we're awesome." Brightspirit said, as if it were obvious. "After just five moons of training, we were sent into the heart of a battle for our warriors' assessments."

"A battle?!" Orioleflight practically squeaked, thoroughly intrigued.

"How about we go over there and discuss it? We're kind of standing in everyone's way." Lemmingleap suggested suddenly, glancing back at the arriving MireClan cats who seemed to be shoving cats out of their path.

Orioleflight bounded away, halting under a willow tree at the opposite side from the apprentices' dark green bushes. Twistertail had seen the warriors talking under here before, but the only time she had been under it was when she was asking the ForestClan warriors about Galepaw's leaving.

Now, she settled on a particularly tall root as Orioleflight, Brightspirit, and Lemmingleap congregated beneath her.

"That's so crazy. Me and Wrenwings' assessment was to drive away those rogues from under the bridge. But being sent into a battle? That's so cool!" Orioleflight said excitedly.

"It wasn't a battle. But it was a raid on the MireClan nursery." Twistertail explained.

Orioleflight only looked more maliciously interested. "Ooh, did you steal any kits?" she prodded violently.

"Um, no. I was on the patrol that went over there, but all I did was help dig the hole we crawled through. And we weren't targeting the kits. Their mother Heathflower had killed the deputy's sister, and we still don't know why. So, Mothtail killed her. But the queen had alerted the entire Clan by then, so they attacked." she detailed.

Brightspirit spoke up, rather rudely. "It was so awesome! The three senior warriors we brought along were the ones to run in first when we heard the yowling. When I could finally poke my head in, I saw this giant warrior about to eat my sister! I totally leaped onto his

face and probably tore out an eye!" he puffed his chest out.

"That's an exaggeration." Twistertail stated evenly.

"What happened then?" Lemmingleap's orange-ish amber eyes were wide.

"Mothtail... told me to go after the kits. I was trying to protect them, but I guess that warrior thought I was trying to hurt them. Anyways, I reunited them with the other cats. But before I could do anything to help the kits, they told me to go away. So I did." Twistertail recounted.

"I was the only cat to stick around and obey her orders!" Brightspirit puffed out his chest even more, if that was even possible.

"...What order? Mothtail didn't tell you to do anything." Twistertail said accusingly as she turned to face her brother.

"You know. She told us to go after those kits. So I did."

"I'm sorry, *what*?!"

"Relax! I didn't do much. I just bit off the ear of the smallest one. It didn't even bleed, I think."

Twistertail stared in shock. "You bit the ear off a kit because that old flea-pelt told you to? That's insane!" she growled.

Brightspirit looked confused. "But... that's how I earned my warrior name. I followed the deputy's orders." he said defensively, deflating slightly.

"Did she really?" Lemmingleap spoke softly.

"I can't believe you." Twistertail narrowed her eyes at the white tom. He was overenthusiastic and foolishly loyal, but she never imagined he would do something as malicious as hurting a kit. Wouldn't something like that go against the Valley Cat Code?

"Twistertail? Are you alright?" Lemmingleap put a paw on the

black-and-white cat's shoulder. "Uh... Sure. I'm just gonna go... meet some of the other warriors." Twistertail sprang to her paws, turning away from her friends. She needed a break from her crazy brother.

Mousefall towered above even the fully grown warriors, so he was easy to find. He was talking to Falconflight, a GroveClan elder. Twistertail sat down beside the pale tabby, and together they listened to the speckled gray tom hoarsely tell of a possum that bit him on the nose as an apprentice.

"That's a very interesting story, Falconflight." Mousefall dipped his head politely as the tom stood up to visit another cat. The tabby turned to the young warrior. "Did you have something to say, Twistertail?"

"...I was just wondering if you could introduce me to a few of the warriors." she requested.

"Sure. Follow me." the tom stood up and scanned the crowd. "Have you met any of the ConiferClan elders..."

Twistertail sat down quietly next to Lemmingleap, who winked at the black-and-white she-cat. She curled her tail in and cast her gaze to the bench, where the seven leaders waited for the crowd to settle down.

"I said, please lend us your ears!" Sedgestar grumbled audibly.

A ghostly quiet settled over the clearing, with the MireClan leader finally sitting down. "We have some news that you may have heard just now. About a half-moon ago, our queen Heathflower was murdered, with one of her kits losing an ear. We have withheld a vicious retort only because there seems to be a misunderstanding." he sent an eerie golden glare at Sandystar.

"ForestClan warriors were hunting on our territory. A MireClan border patrol rightfully drove them back, but accidentally took the life of Dovetail, the deputy's sister and one of the senior warriors. Dovetail was running away from the border when she tripped over a tree root and fell, possibly breaking her neck." he reported.

A few mutters could be heard around the clearing, but Sedgestar never once looked away from the ForestClan leader, who flattened her ears. "It was no accident! Dovetail's apprentice at the time, Thornpaw, said he saw a MireClan warrior snap her neck and drag her body into ForestClan territory to make it look like she had fallen!" the leader replied hotly.

"And for your information, she wasn't a senior warrior. Dovetail was more than that. Not only was she the mother of me, Robinsong, and two apprentices, she was a permanent queen. Our rules protect those cats above all else- slightly above healers and slightly below kits themselves." Cardinalheart spoke smoothly.

A few meows of protest sounded from the crowd, but Sedgestar waved them away. "Even if Dovetail was a permanent queen, her death isn't the issue I wish to discuss. In case you didn't know, the strip of land off of ForestClan territory belongs to MireClan. Basically, you were hunting for frogs on MireClan territory."

The meows grew to several yowls of disapproval. "Sedgestar, please consider your claim. Your territory is the marsh, not the marsh and a strip of land. Like your border with ConiferClan. Since it isn't clear where the ground begins, everything in the water is considered yours." Sandystar reasoned.

"That isn't exactly what I was concerned about, Sandystar. You were hunting frogs. Those are the prey of MireClan."

"The frogs were on our territory, Sedgestar." the leader's voice rose considerably.

"That land isn't in the forest! Half the time it's flooded in water! Frogs live there! It is MireClan territory!" the large tabby roared. Any cry of protest was silenced by his predictable outburst. Sedgestar looked around at the quieted cats before whirling back to the cream-colored she-cat. "And any ForestClan cat caught with a paw on our territory will pay the ultimate price." he growled, dangerously softly.

Twistertail landed expertly in the spiky grass. Her catch, a squirrel she had plucked from a low-hanging branch, dangled in her jaws as

she swung around to face her audience. Amberpaw's eyes were wide as she admired the kill. "Wow." she breathed. "I wish I could do that."

"You probably could, if you tried." Twistertail suggested.

"Really?" the young apprentice seemed to perk up.

"That wasn't an admirable pounce." Robinsong said flatly from behind the pair. "Did you see the way she landed on the tree with her legs all over the place?"

"Um..." Amberpaw lowered her head, knowing her mentor was going to burn down any response she made.

"How about you try it? I'll tell you what to do." Twistertail suggested.

A few moments later, the three she-cats were trotting through the forest when Amberpaw suddenly crouched down in front of a large tree. Twistertail backed into the bushes while Robinsong shuffled to the side to not disturb the apprentice.

' Twistertail was a full year old now, but she had never seen such a powerful pounce from any cat. Amberpaw disappeared in the blink of an eye, shooting across the forest floor and skidding under a bush with heavily yellowed leaves. A dusky bird fluttered away, calling wildly.

"That was amazing!" Twistertail complimented as she neared the pale tabby.

"Really? I didn't catch it, though."

"What was that?!" Robinsong snapped. "What were you trying to accomplish? That had to have been the most uncoordinated attack I've ever seen!"

"Give her a break, Robinsong! This is her first time hunting, so obviously she wouldn't be very good at it. And it isn't an attack. Honestly, are you going to teach her anything but combat training?" Twistertail retorted.

"Don't tell me what to do!" the giant she-cat snapped. "What makes you think you know how to train an apprentice?"

"You trained Squirrelstrike with that mindset, and look how she turned out!" Twistertail said, louder than she expected. Robinsong raised her head, her snakelike yellow eyes glittering in anticipation. "Like what?" she snarled, luring the argument from the younger warrior.

"You know, the most hostile and aggressive cat in the Clan! Didn't she used to be a good cat? But then you trained her and now she's prickly and irritable! I'm genuinely surprised she didn't start a fight at the last gathering. No one likes how you made her!" Twistertail yowled. It felt strange to yell at a senior warrior, but this wasn't the fury she felt when play-fighting as a kit. This was truly unfair, and Robinsong needed to be stopped.

"Now she respects those put in power." the reddish-orange warrior growled.

"She bullies everyone below her!"

"She's the most agile and destructive warrior we have!"

"Squirrelstrike's training in the Frozen Forest!" Twistertail roared. "She goes there all the time!"

It wasn't until the red in her vision cleared that she noticed the rest of the hunting patrol staring at her in shock. The deputy and his apprentice-brother Finchpaw, plus Lilyspring shared a moment of stunned silence. Finally, Cardinalheart stepped forwards, his expression unreadable. "Twistertail... how would you know that?" he asked softly.

"Um... Brightspirit told me?" Twistertail squeaked unevenly.

"Brightspirit and Daisyshine took a special oath in front of our leaders that he would never go there again." Cardinalheart said gravely. "So how could you know that..."

"Unless you train in the dark forest?" Lilyspring finished.

"That's not the point! Robinsong and Squirrelstrike are training in the Frozen Forest!" Twistertail wailed.

"But you go there, to?" Amberpaw spoke up.

"Is this true?" Cardinalheart was firm, but obviously conflicted. "You're not training in the Frozen Forest, are you?"

"Um... Uh..." Twistertail backed up as the five pairs of eyes stared back at her, the following faces ranging from accusing to just plain shocked. Suddenly, a strange sound reached her ears. A high pitched scream was ringing out through the forest from uphill. After a few confused moments, the screeching was accompanying by the sound of four paws quickly trampling the fallen leaves.

Shadowsweep burst through the foliage, still screaming wildly. Barely a moment later she seized Twistertail in her forelegs, snarling furiously. "No! No! Not like that!" she yowled.

"Uh- Wha-" the young warrior fumbled for words. The healer was covered in bits of twigs and leaves, and she looked as if she hadn't slept in days.

"Calm down, Shadowsweep-" Cardinalheart tried to place a paw on her shoulder, but the she-cat hissed and swatted at him blindly. "You try to calm down when everything is falling apart!" After a terrifying moment, the healer abruptly stopped shaking her. "Wait. It's all falling into place. You caught the robin. This is how it happens. But the prophecy..." she trailed off ominously before turning to the still-stunned hunting patrol.

The black-and-white she-cat thrust a single claw in the general direction of the young warrior. "It makes sense now! She's the one in the prophecy! Twistertail is the one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star!" she yowled triumphantly.

"Shadowsweep! Come quick!" a panicked voice rang out through the trees.

The healer's ears perked up, and she suddenly raced off uphill. Twistertail glanced back at the rest of the patrol, who sped up to

chase after Shadowsweep. The young warrior stepped to the side, casting her gaze to the ground to avoid any possible eye contact. When Amberpaw trotted past her to catch up with her mentor, she finally looked up.

Twistertail's striped tail dragged in the fallen leaves as she reluctantly crawled uphill. The camp was only a few moose-lengths away, but she made every step as slow as possible, not wanting to face the Clan once they knew about her training in the Frozen Forest.

Her mind wandered to the healer's strange words. She had caught the robin, which could mean nothing else than her exposing Robinsong for training Squirrelstrike in the Frozen Forest. But when could Shadowsweep have gotten that kind of message?

The realization hit her like a herd of stampeding reindeer. She had snuck out of camp the day before she became an apprentice, but she had caught a robin. When Shadowsweep found her, she had been dazed for a moment before saying she had a vision. It could only mean that the healer had been receiving signs of that moment ever since she was a kit.

But the prophecy... could 'joining the dark' really be about her training in the Frozen Forest? One of the elders had told her long ago that the place used to be referred to as the Dark Forest when the Valley Cats first settled. It wasn't that big of a stretch. But then, the brightest star?

Before she could ponder the wording further, she heard a desperate wail from inside the camp. Twistertail forced her head through to the other side of the hollow log, just in time to witness Basilfang let out another pitiful howl from just outside the elders' den. Lying in a heap in front of him was Sprucefall, clearly dead.

"How could you just run off in the middle of saving his life? You're a healer! How could you just abandon him like that!" Parsleyshade was furiously snarling at Shadowsweep.

"I was having another vision!" the healer protested. "I solved part of the prophecy!"

"What's going on?" Amberpaw piped up from where she was pressed against Robinsong's side.

Parsleyshade cast a venomous glare around at the gathering cats. "Shadowsweep killed our father! She left him to die! She ran off while he was choking on his own saliva!" she yowled.

"But I solved part of the prophecy!" the healer repeated even louder, as if the whole Clan hadn't heard her the first time. Sandystar shoved her way towards the fallen elder, her eyes narrowed in concern. "Shadowsweep's visions are strong, Parsleyshade. She did the right thing if SpiritClan was guiding her paws to... where did she go?" the leader looked around, trying to piece together the mess.

"It all made sense, so I just had to tell them! Robinsong was training Squirrelstrike in the Frozen Forest! And Twistertail is the one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star!" Shadowsweep reported.

"This is... crazy." Sandystar shook her head, even more confused. "Shadowsweep, Twistertail, Robinsong. Meet me in my den." the leader walked off to await her company. The young warrior had taken one step when she heard her name being called.

"Wait! Twistertail!" Finchpaw leaped forwards, carrying the squirrel she had dropped sometime during her argument with Robinsong.

"Oh! Thank you, Finchpaw!" Twistertail felt a small spark of joy as the apprentice set down the prey to speak more clearly. "I'll just put it on the prey bush, or if you want it..."

For the first time in her life, the young warrior was going to give an order. "You can give it to Parsleyshade's kits, if you would, please."

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I, Twistertail of ForestClan, solemnly swear to never enter the Frozen Forest again, for as long as I live." the young warrior recited.

"Good. You three may take your paws out of the Moonpond now." Sandystar nodded in approval. Robinsong, Squirrelstrike, and Twistertail removed their front paws from the shallows, flicking off the icy water. Even though leaf-fall had just set in, the water held an icy chill.

"Sandystar," Sagepool sat up quickly from where he had been watching the ceremony with his apprentice Mosspaw. "I do believe we should stop by RockClan first. At the half-moon meeting a few days ago, Fernflutter had mentioned that they needed a fresh supply of catmint to treat serious coughs. Since ForestClan is the only Clan with access to that twoleg garden, I made sure to gather plenty last time."

"Go on. Why didn't you inform me of this before?" Sandystar asked, a little impatiently.

"...That's where I was this morning, when Sprucefall died. I just... didn't want to bring that subject up... in case you asked." the tom lowered his head.

"That's alright. But I won't be able to make it through such rocky territory, what with my leg." Snadystar stretched out her hind leg, showing the warriors a sickening display. Where Mango had bitten her a few moons ago, it had turned all kinds of colors, and was coated with a clear, sticky substance.

"That looks even worse than it did when we left!" Sagepool's eyes widened. "If that wound opens up again, the infection could spread

to your blood. Ravenflight had seen it happen in the healthiest of warriors. You need to go back to camp and rest!" he ordered.

"Very well. But you should probably give RockClan that catmint. How about Robinsong and Squirrelstrike see me home while Twistertail and Amberpaw go with you?" Sandystar suggested.

"Sounds like a plan. I'll meet you back at the camp by moonhigh." Sagepool nodded, rallying the shy apprentice with his tail. "Come on, Mosspaw. Let's go give that catmint to RockClan!"

"No. Absolutely not." the deputy's voice was cold.

"But, Cricketridge! She isn't protecting me against RockClan. This isn't a threat, really! She's just escorting us to make sure we don't get carried away by bats or something!" Sagepool protested.

Cricketridge's eyes narrowed even further. "Healers are protected on all territories. You don't need a warrior to escort you, Sagepool." the pale tabby she-cat's dark brown eyes glittered aggressively at Twistertail. "Leave our territory. You are not welcome here." she snarled.

"Alright alright, I'm going." the black-and-white she-cat reluctantly stepped away from the bristling RockClan dusk patrol, guiding her paws as close to the stream as she could. The gray rocks seemed to glow warmly in the sunset, and Twistertail admired them silently as she slowly made her way downhill away from the healers.

But then, she heard it- a whisper that wasn't from the stream. Her head shot up and she searched the rocks for another cat. Maybe Mosspaw had followed her? It sounded like her voice.

"Yes, you!" the voice hissed.

"Wha-Who are you? Where are you?" Twistertail turned in quick circles, trying to figure out where it was coming from.

"On the other side of the stream, under the two boulders." she could barely hear over the noise of the water. But as she focused on the other side of the stream, in CliffClan territory, she could make out two green eyes staring back at her. An unmistakable scrawny

black she-cat stepped forwards. "Come here!" she curled her tail in.

"Um... why?" Twistertail hung back, hesitant. This cat had motive to kidnap her, and through all their moons of training in the Frozen Forest, had proven that she was comfortable with her claws. "I have something to show you!" Onyxpaw hissed.

"That sounds totally not suspicious and creepy at all! Surely I'll follow you into a dark tunnel on CliffClan territory, alone, at nightfall!"

"I'm serious. Do you want to see your mother and idiot siblings or not?"

Twistertail was immediately silenced, wading into the water. A few moments later, she was scrambling onto the even-more-rocky shore of the CliffClan territory. Onyxpaw nodded at her sister before taking off into oblivion. Twistertail wanted to follow cautiously, but couldn't stray far for fear of losing all sense of direction in the superior darkness.

"Ah, so you finally managed to bring her here!" Shattersweep crowed. Twistertail wanted to cower behind her sister, but Onyxpaw was much too small to hide her. Instead, the black-and-white she-cat stepped forwards, not seeing any sense in running. "Yes. I am Twistertail of ForestClan, and I have come to see my siblings." she declared.

"Can I become a warrior now?" Onyxpaw demanded her mentor impatiently.

Shattersweep rolled his eyes. "Sure, of course. Your ceremony will be at moonhigh with the other one. But for now, why don't you show your sister around? I'm going to be sleeping until then, so don't bother me." the tall tom turned quickly and disappeared into one of the many tunnels that broke away from the cave the two cats were now standing alone in.

Twistertail's eyes were finally adjusting to the darkness when she could see Onyxpaw grinning widely at her. "So? What do you think my warrior name will be?" the black cat pressured. "Onyxfur?

Onyxstone? Onyxstrike? That'd be a cool name."

Twistertail felt a bolt of deja vu, seeing a similarity between Onyxpaw and Brightspirit.

"Yes, but... weren't you supposed to reunite all of your siblings for your assessment?"

"Turns out there was no long-lost brother. That was just something Shattersweep made up to test me. And he decided that since Brightspirit is such a loyal member of ForestClan, that won't even be part of my assessment!" Onyxpaw almost squealed, clearly enthusiastic about the idea of becoming a warrior.

"Oh! You should meet the Clan! I'll show you!" the senior apprentice suddenly darted into the tunnel her mentor had taken, just fast enough to almost throw off her sister. After only a few heartbeats, they emerged in a much larger cave, which was lit by some kind of blue-glowing moss that cast an eerie light over the rocks, reflecting off of the many puddles below.

"Wow. This is... crazy." Twistertail managed.

"That's Quartzstar and Shardclaw sitting on the pile of boulders, but you've seen them before. And there's Smokesight and Lightshine, our two most valuable warriors." Onyxpaw nodded towards the center pile of rocks, where several cats were sitting.

"Anyways, you should meet the fellow apprentices. But would you like to go on our evening hunt for bats?" the black cat seemed almost hyper as she threw suggestions at the young warrior.

"Maybe I could meet some cats before you leave?"

"Sure thing! Follow me- and watch your step. We wouldn't want you getting impaled by a stalagmite on your way to the apprentices' cave!" Onyxpaw chirped as she took off through another tunnel at the edge of the cavern. Twistertail barely had time to glance around at the large cave before she followed the black cat. On the other side, a pawful of young cats were talking amongst themselves.

"Guys, you should meet Twistertail! I mean, Possumpaw already

knows her, but come on!" the black cat waved their tail wildly as a few apprentices bounded over. "There's Talonpaw, Featherpaw, Breezepaw, and Pebblepaw!"

Three of the four strange cats were instantly crowding the young warrior, asking an impossible amount of questions. Only Possumpaw and a fluffy she-cat hung back. Was that Featherpaw? Her pelt looked much fuller than the others, who were heavily scarred from the rough CliffClan training. The largest one even had fresh wounds!

Twistertail managed a smile as she tried to answer their many requests. "No, I'm not invading. Yes, I'm Onyxpaw's sister. Um... No, ForestClan cats don't eat grass." Even though she talked rapidly, the apprentices asked her even more specific questions.

"Is Cardinalheart mentoring his own brother?"

"Are Brightspirit and Daisyshine mates?"

"Why don't you have any battle scars?"

"What's ForestClan, again?"

"Hello? Galepaw? Magpiepaw?" Twistertail called. The healers' cave gave off a creepy aura, and she didn't like it. Maybe if she could locate her siblings, it would feel less unwelcome.

"We're over here. And it's Galesong and Magpiepelt. We became full healers!" a familiar voice called. Twistertail rounded a stalagmite to see her younger brother and sister leaning over a puddle that bizarrely reflected the roof of the cave.

"Galesong! Magpiepelt!" Twistertail yowled, clearing the puddle in one leap. She pulled her siblings in for a warm embrace, feeling her usual determination reviving itself in the company of the two cats.

"Hey, CliffClan healers need to breathe, too!" Galesong managed, purring joyfully.

"Nice to see you too, Twisterpaw. But seriously, I think you're going to squeeze my tail off." Magpiepelt chuckled slightly.

The young warrior stepped back, ignoring her back paws which landed in the icy puddle. "I'm Twistertail now! But... how did you guys become full healers? Don't CliffClan cats train the hardest out of all nine Clans?"

"Here, healers are treated like royalty! We get the first pick of all the prey, and all we have to do is watch these puddles for any sign from spirits. It could be SpiritClan, the Frozen Forest, or some random ghost. Oh, and don't be afraid if you hear howling and see a pale whiteish cat hanging around. That's Crystalstar, the founder of CliffClan." Galesong explained.

"Okay. I'll keep an eye out for the ghost cat." Twistertail nodded, unsure if she was being sarcastic or not.

"Have you met Dawnlight? That's my former mentor, and the most skilled starseer." Galesong tilted his head at his older sister.

"Um... starseer?"

"That's what we call the cats who watch for signs." Magpiepelt explained softly. "But we're still healers, though."

Galesong suddenly leaped to his feet. "But Twistertail, what are you doing here? Have you decided to join us?" he prodded, his dark blue eyes sparkling with hope.

"..." Twistertail hung back, uncertain. Wasn't she just visiting?

"Well, are you?" a high-pitched voice sounded from behind her. Twistertail craned her neck to see Onyxpaw, who was padding towards them. "It's your decision, you know. I wouldn't keep you hostage. I've already passed my assessment by bringing you here. It doesn't matter if you stay, but... it'd mean a lot to us." the apprentice's voice softened considerably.

"Um..." the young warrior looked between the apprentice and her two siblings.

"Follow me." Onyxpaw commanded flatly, veering into a tiny tunnel in the wall.

"Alright. Well, I'll see you guys later." Twistertail cast a glance at her younger siblings, who looked just as confused as she was. What was up with their sister?

"So, Onyxpaw! How was the hunt!" Twistertail tried to sound cheerful.

"It was fine. I caught four bats." Onyxpaw shrugged, not taking her eyes off of the puddle they were crouched over.

A long silence crawled by. "I think it would be the obvious choice for you to stay here." the black cat finally admitted.

"You want me to stay?"

"I mean, cats of all Clans still believe you're responsible for Poppystar's death. I was on the patrol watching you guys at the Moonpond, and I overheard Sagepool say that he blames you for the death of his father. Not to mention you were there this evening because you were taking a vow to never enter the Frozen Forest again for as long as you live." Onyxpaw reasoned.

"But here, you can enter the Frozen Forest any time you want. Once you're a part of CliffClan, no one cares about what you do. We have freedom that the other Clans see as strange, or even evil. Unfamiliar isn't evil, you know." the black cat promised, glaring at her reflection.

"But I have friends in ForestClan! At least, I think. And these CliffClan cats seem to be very aggressive. I mean, I'd only join to be with Galesong and Magpiepelt, but I'm not good at anything you guys do. Not to mention my mother probably hates me..." Twistertail also stared fiercely at her reflection, recalling how she was obviously Snowspirit's least favorite kit.

After a brief pause in the conversation, a question struck her mind. "Wait. Why did Snowspirit bring them to CliffClan?"

Onyxpaw sighed before shaking her head sadly. "Snowspirit was a ForestClan warrior, I believe the sister of a she-cat called Mintleaf, who is probably the mother of Lilyspring and Daisyshine. I don't

know for sure. But sometime in her warriorhood, Darkcloud became her mate. However, somewhere along the line, she fell in love with Obsidian-eye, a CliffClan warrior."

"You mean she was cheating on my father?"

"Let me finish. Snowspirit didn't want Darkcloud's attention, but one day she discovered she was pregnant. She ran to CliffClan during an outbreak of fierce battles between ForestClan and WoodClan. Anyways, when she gave birth in CliffClan, Obsidian-eye rejected the kits since no one knows who their father is, and it might be both toms."

"My father could be a CliffClan cat?" Twistertail breathed.

"That's not the point. The previous leader, Shadestar, set a rule that until Obsidian-eye became an elder, Snowspirit would not be welcome in CliffClan. So, she took five of the six kits, but unfortunately Possumpaw was lost near the MeadowClan border. And I, of course, was the one taken in by Obsidian-eye because I look almost exactly like him."

"So that's why Snowspirit ran to CliffClan? Because her former mate was an elder now and she could... What was she trying to do?"

"As I was saying," Onyxpaw shot her a look. "Darkcloud was growing to be fiercely ambitious. He became the deputy, and pushed the ForestClan rules to their limits. He was threatening Snowspirit and his closest friends, so of course cats started disliking him. One day, he ordered the young kits Mousekit, Squirrelkit, and Marmotkit into battle. Marmotkit was slain, but when confronted about it by his mother Marblestar, he killed her in front of the entire Clan."

"Oh... I didn't know about that."

"Needless to say, he and his few supporters were exiled. I take it Twistedbramble has told you about Marmotkit's disappearance? She has no idea he was killed moons ago." Onyxpaw bared her teeth in a snarl. "You know Talonpaw? Their warriors' assessment is to reunite that family. I was thinking, once you knew everything..."

"Yes?"

"You should help them. I'll be there. Sometime in the next few moons, we'll be contacting Mousefall and Squirrelstrike to reunite them with their parents and siblings. Darkcloud will be there. And, if you meet him in real life and you don't like him, that's fine. But if you do..."

"What happens then?"

Onyxpaw turned away from the water to glare lovingly at her sister. "Then I think maybe you'll want to stay here. Maybe. Just do it, for me."

Twistertail offered a slight smile. "Okay. I'll try it. What do I do?"

Onyxpaw seemed to light up with joy at her words. "Expose Mousefall for training in the Frozen Forest. His sister is bound to follow him to the Moonpond to take his vow. That's when we'll meet again."

"Onyxpaw, you have proven yourself to be a dedicated and selfless warrior. From this day forwards, you will be known as Onyx-eye, named after the physical resemblance to your father."

Twistertail was one of the many cats gathered beneath the boulders who cheered loudly for Onyx-eye as she leaped onto one of the rocks and puffed out her scrawny chest, her bizarrely thin tail held high and vibrating with pride.

"Onyx-eye! Onyx-eye!" the cats yowled.

"Possumpaw, please step forwards." Quartzstar called. The pale gray she-cat shied to the front, clearly nervous but excited at the same time. "Possumpaw, you have shown the Clan your remarkable hunting skills and considerable agility. From this day forwards, you will be known as Possumstrike." the leader declared.

"Possumstrike!" Twistertail called out, hoping the timid she-cat would be strengthened by her support. The new warrior made her way up the rocks to stand awkwardly next to Onyx-eye. The pale gray she-cat towered over the black cat, but their responses to the

crowd's applause was as different as the sun and moon.

"That is all for tonight. Shardclaw shall organize the moonhigh patrol." Quartzstar nodded at the deputy, who was already scanning the gathered crowd.

The cats had begun to walk away when Twistertail broke away from where she was sitting beside her two healer-siblings. "Onyx-eye! What a cool name!" she purred. "Wanna go on that moonhigh patrol?"

Onyx-eye seemed to deflate slightly. "I wish. But me and Possumstrike have to sit vigil for the rest of the night. And weren't you supposed to be back by moonhigh?"

"Oh, right. Well... I'll see you sometime in the next few moons." Twistertail turned away from the pile of boulders, trying desperately to hide the grin that ravaged her muzzle.

"See you then." Onyxpaw promised from her perch on the rocks.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Twistertail woke with a start, her ears perking at the screeching.

"That's not fair! Only the senior warriors sleep in the middle!"

"If I could just move this stupid bracken-!"

"Siblings usually get nests together. Maybe we should do that?"

She sat up suddenly, blinking at Finchpaw and Sparrowpaw. The air was gray and dark in the cool moments before dawn, and everything smelled of rain. The two apprentices were bouncing around the warriors' den, planning out where their nests were going to be.

"Settle down, you two. We're still using these." Crowpelt grumbled from his place in the warm center of the den. Since he was the oldest warrior now, he got to sleep in the best spot, especially now that the weather was getting cold again.

Twistertail slowly stood, yawning and stretching. Most of the warriors were awake now, grumbling at the senior apprentices. The black-and-white she-cat stepped outside into the dull, bluish-grayish light from the sky. Brightspirit was the second cat out, licking his muzzle profusely.

"Those rascals! Finchpaw stepped on my face and made me bite my tongue!" he spat.

"How terrible! The mighty Brightspirit defeated by that dreadful beast!" Twistertail flicked his ear with her long tail. "Lighten up, you. Have you seen your mentor's kits recently? I was going to eat something, but it'd be wiser to bring the queens something to eat, especially since it's getting colder by the day."

Brightspirit nodded proudly, racing off into the frosty morning. He returned a few heartbeats later with a mockingbird in his jaws.

Inside the nursery, Parsleyshade and Squirrelstrike were curled up with their young kits. Brightspirit leaped over to the ginger she-cat and nuzzled his mate furiously. "I brought you something. I caught it yesterday on the moonlight patrol, and I guess no one took it." he purred.

"Thanks." Squirrelstrike said simply. Ever since she had stopped visiting the Frozen Forest and started a family, she had become a lot less aggressive. Now, she curled up with Brightspirit and watched their two kits lovingly. Both where a mix of white with ginger tabby patches.

Twistertail crept closer to the fluffy queen, who was grooming her litter of four kits. The black-and-white she-cat crept closer, admiring their perfectly striped pelts. "Has Sagepool named them yet?" she prodded.

Squirrelstrike nodded simply. "Yes, he has. The larger one is Duskkit, and the smaller one is Sparkkit."

The kits were three moons old, but they were small and underfed. The cold season had been hard on everyone, but it preyed on the young and old the most. Pansypool and Cedarspike had been defeated by the harsh weather, even before the first frost.

"Poor me, forgotten by my own apprentice." Parsleyshade commented from her side of the nursery.

Brightspirit lifted his head before stepping over to the older queen. "I didn't forget you, of course. Who is going to mentor your kits?" he asked, pricking his whiskers at his mentor's four six-moon-old kits.

"Cardinalheart hasn't had the time to visit with them, what with being deputy and all. And Sandystar is sick, isn't she? That infection never goes away, does it?" Parlseyshade shook her head. "I was talking to my brother, and he said Moonsweep was receiving signs of a new leader of ForestClan. She's getting more intense visions, talking about hail and snow. I hope it isn't about this terrible

weather." the queen glanced at the sky, as if she could see it through the nursery roof.

ForestClan cats had a lot to worry about. There were growing mouths to feed, plus heavy rain and frozen mud. But Moonsweep's dire predictions had only made them even more concerned about the future. The old healer was beginning to grow gray hairs around her muzzle, and she wouldn't gain weight. But she still talked nonstop about strange prophecies.

Twistertail shook her head to clear her mind. Sandystar had said something about the ceremony at dawn, hadn't she? Just as she was pondering the event, she heard a yowl sound from outside. But it clearly wasn't Sandystar.

"Cats of ForestClan, please gather for a Clan meeting!" Cardinalheart called.

Finchpaw, Sparrowpaw, Amberpaw, and Thornpaw were at the front of the crowd in an instant. Their excitement was clearly displayed on their faces, but something was off. Sandystar sat hunched over on a root of the leader's tree, breathing raggedly. Twistertail sat down next to Mousefall and Basilfang, who she had grown even closer to in the last few moons.

"Unfortunately, Sandystar's infection has gotten worse in the past few days." Cardinalheart cast a glance at Sagepool, who was already stepping forwards to elaborate.

"She has a very high fever and considerable shortness of breath. With that in mind, Cardinalheart shall represent her in today's meeting." the cream-colored tom proposed.

"Cardinalstar!" Finchpaw yowled, springing forwards. His mentor smiled slightly and shook his head. "No, Finchpaw. It's just until Sandystar gets better." he tried to sound serious, but suddenly any merriment he was feeling was visibly squashed down. "I do have some more serious news, though. I am officially retiring from my posisition as deputy to become a permanent queen. When Dovetail's and Mothtail's and Parsleyshade's kits were born, I never left their side until they became apprentices. And now, being deputy has

made me realize just how much I belong in the nursery. I don't know who the new deputy will be, but I will let you know as soon as I make the decision." he announced.

There were mixed replies from the Clan, but that was quickly silenced. "First order of business..." Immediately after Cardinalheart had everyone's attention again, Sandystar let out a string of miserable coughs.

"Sandystar? Are you alright?" the deputy cast a worried glance at her. The ForestClan leader nodded in assurance, blinking her rheumy eyes pointedly.

"Well, then. First order of business, the two oldest apprentices passed their warriors' assessments on the moonlight patrol last night. By proving their skill in hunting, Finchpaw and Sparrowpaw shall receive their warrior names." Cardinalheart grinned widely at his brothers. Finchpaw sprang even closer, his tail vibrating. Sparrowpaw simply inched forwards a tiny bit, curling his tail in neatly.

"I have trained you for the past nine moons, and you have earned your status as a warrior." Cardinalheart began. "Finchpaw, from now on you will be known as Finchflame. ForestClan honors you for your enthusiasm and energy."

Finchflame cheered his own name, along with most of the Clan.

Cardinalheart turned to Mousefall, who was puffing out his chest with pride. "Mousefall, has Sparrowpaw trained to the fullest extent to become a warrior?"

"Of course!" Mousefall said joyfully.

"Sparrowpaw, from now on you will be known as Sparrowspots, named after your spotted pelt. ForestClan honors you for your determination and mindfulness."

Sparrowspots didn't shy away from the applause, but he did nod in acknowledgement.

"As you may recall, a few days ago we sent three apprentices on a

patrol to confront MireClan cats lingering on our territory. They valiantly fought the intruders off, and now that Thornpaw has healed from his injuries, they may receive their warrior names. Amberpaw, Thornpaw, and Pumpkinpaw, please step forwards!" Cardinalheart turned his head to the three remaining apprentices.

"You three have proven your loyalty by fighting off MireClan cats that were marking our territory. Basilfang, has Pumpkinpaw proved her place in the Clan alongside our warriors?"

Basilfang spoke proudly from where he was sitting on the opposite side of Mousefall. "She absolutely has!" the tom declared.

"Then from now on, Pumpkinpaw shall be known as Pumpkinpelt, named after her appearance."

Pumpkinpelt let out a squeal of joy as the cats cheered for her, looking to her friend Finchflame first, then Bailfang, then Twistertail and finally Cardinalheart.

"Robinsong, has Amberpaw-" the deputy was cut off by the still-bitter warrior's response.

"Yeah, yeah. She's good." the reddish-orange she-cat grunted.

"Then from now on, Amberpaw shall be known as Ambereyes, named after her appearance. ForestClan honors you for your compassion and honesty." Cardinalheart declared. Ambereyes crouched down, smiling shyly at the roaring cats.

"Sandystar, has Thornpaw proven himself to be... Sandystar?" the deputy's expression turned from joy to concern. The leader was hunched over, her eyes unfocused.

Sagepool rushed forwards, his tail lashing worriedly. "Let's get you inside, Sandystar," he said hurriedly. "Mosspaw, could you come help me?"

Cardinalheart waited until the two healers had escorted the leader a few tail-lengths into her den before he turned back to the crowd. "I'm sure she's fine. Just a bit tired, is all... Um, Thornpaw, please step forwards."

The usually-excited apprentice inched forwards, not taking his eyes off of the leader's den.

"From now on, you shall be known as Thornspike. ForestClan honors you for your... resemblance to your great-uncle... or great-half-brother? Anyways... energy and enthusiasm." the deputy finished between looks at the tree roots below him. A few cats cheered, although most were still focused on the leader's den, as if they were waiting for Sagepool to emerge and tell them their leader was alright.

"Next order of business. Parsleyshade's kits should be apprentices." Cardinalheart was talking faster now, clearly wanting the meeting to be over so he could check on his leader. "Thrushkit, Purslanekit, Berrykit, Rosekit, you are apprentices now. Thrushpaw, your mentor is Mousefall. Purslanepaw, your mentor is Brightspirit. Rosepaw, your mentor is Twistertail. Berrypaw, your mentor is Basilfang. This gathering is dismissed."

"I don't know why Cardinalheart made you Rosepaw's mentor, but that was obviously the wrong choice." Robinsong growled fiercely.

Twistertail took a step back. "Wha- why?" the two she-cats were alone, having just buried their prey to catch up with the rest of the hunting patrol.

"You're unreliable and irresponsible, just like everyone else in your family. Just look at your siblings, for example. Magpiepaw ran off to join another Clan with her mother. Galepaw took one look and fled there not a moon later. Brightspirit is easily the most reckless cat I've met. And you... You've broken a lot of rules, but I don't recall you getting punished for anything." Robinsong ranted.

Twistertail flattened her ears. "It's Magpiepelt and Galesong now, for your information. And Magpiepelt was probably kidnapped by that crazy furball. Galesong just wanted to be with her. Sure, Brightspirit can be impulsive and annoying, but he's good at heart. Just a little misguided, is all." she spat.

"Ah, and you're defending them!" Robinsong crowed triumphantly.

Just then, Rosepaw burst through the bushes. The pretty pinkish-orange tabby landed gracefully in front of her mentor, carrying a vole. "Twistertail! Look what I caught!"she squealed.

"That's great, Rosepaw! Why don't you bury it with the two mice I caught?" the warrior said joyfully, flicking her tail at the freshly-turned dirt. Her apprentice nodded and dutifully buried her catch before trotting off ahead.

"Just wait and see. Rosepaw won't respect you once she learns how much of a coward you are, and I wouldn't blame her." Robinsong hissed. "I can't wait to see her on the battlefield. What did her mentor teach her? Do nothing when your Clan needs you, and let everyone else do all the work!"

"I don't-"

"Admit it, Twistertail! You did nothing while your siblings were kidnapped. You did nothing while our deputy was slain. You did nothing while-"

"That ends now, then." Twistertail held up a paw. She had learned by now that yelling at the older warrior wouldn't help her situation. "...Thank you."

"What?!" the huge she-cat practically roared.

"Thank you for informing me of my mistakes. From now on, I will do my best to help where I can and not fall victim to my weaknesses." With that, Twistertail turned away to follow after the hunting patrol, which had to be at the WoodClan border by now. Robinsong spat furiously at the younger warrior as she walked away without so much as a flick of the ear- something that confused and enraged the senior warrior, who seemed to take delight in yelling at everyone who didn't outrank her.

As she walked away through the frigid woodland, she felt a stab of doubt. Robinsong was right- all she had done was cause trouble for her Clan. The only good thing she had done was find those two lost kits from DeltaClan, and the gratitude from that event had quickly faded.

But then, it dawned on her. Cardinalheart was one of the cats closest to her. He had given her an apprentice for a reason, hadn't he? This was a message. Cats were relying on her now. She couldn't stand by and watch her world fall apart. She was going to fix it.

The pain was bearable, but it still hurt and made it hard to concentrate. After a half-moon of frequent patrols with her apprentice, Twistertail had finally stepped on a thorn. It wasn't a big thorn, but a small one. While a big thorn could impale a toe and was incredibly painful to pry out, a small thorn was harder to spot and arguably hurt a lot more.

Inside the healer's den, Sagepool was hovering over Sandystar, giving a pawful of herbs to the feverish leader. Twistertail turned her attention to Shadowsweep, who was aggressively winding up wads of spiderwebs.

"Hey, Shadowsweep? I stepped on a thorn, could you get it out for me?" the warrior called.

The senior healer leaped over and seized her entire foreleg. "Yep, that's a thorn alright. Sit down in that nest while I get some stuff." she muttered. Twistertail watched as the healer disappeared under a curtain of bracken, off to the place where the herbs were kept.

"Thornpaw... Did he become a warrior?" Sandystar mumbled from her nest. Twistertail curled up into the thick moss, thinking back to the ceremony a half-moon ago.

"Yes, he's Thornspike now."

"Oh. Like Cedarspike. Is that his great uncle... or great half-brother..."

"I recommend limited talking." Sagepool murmured as he touched another leaf to the leader's muzzle. Sandystar's eyes were closed, and she looked incredibly skinny, almost as if she hadn't eaten in two moons.

"Cardinalheart... Did he choose a deputy?" the leader managed.

"No... But I'm sure he'll do it soon."

"Where is he? I need to speak to him."

"He spends all his time in the nursery now-"

Sagepool waved his tail for silence. "She needs to rest!" he snapped.

Twistertail ducked her head just as Moonsweep was returning. "I'll take that thorn out if you'll just hold still." the healer commanded.

The black-and-white warrior squeezed her eyes shut as the older cat pried the thorn from her paw. A few wet leaves were being wrapped around it when Twistertail's eyes flew open at a strange sound. She whipped her head to Sandystar, eyes widening in horror. The ForestClan leader was thrashing around wildly in her nest.

Sagepool surged forwards, seizing he she-cat in his paws. "By the Sacred Sky, Shadowsweep! She's burning up! This... Is she having a seizure because of her fever?" he yowled, looking desperately to the senior healer.

"Yeah. That's what happens if a fever is too high." the she-cat confirmed.

"Wha- what do I do?! Mosspaw is out collecting herbs! Can't you help me?" Sagepool wailed.

"SpiritClan is guiding my paws. I could get some herbs to help her, but..." Shadowsweep finished bandaging the stunned warrior's paws. "Something tells me we should let this happen."

Twistertail sprang to her feet, refusing to sit idly by while another leader died right in front of her. "Sagepool, what do I do?" she demanded. The cream-colored tom didn't take his eyes off the leader, who was still shuddering in her nest.

"If you go into the herb storage, there's an orange flower with a yellow center. That will paralyze her, if she eats four of them." Shadowsweep offered as she rolled up the unused herbs she hadn't used on Twistertail's minor injury.

The warrior sprang away through the curtain, pawing wildly at the herbs. She stumbled upon an orange flower with a red center, but

flung it aside. Finally, she found a pawful of orange petals that had a band of yellow on one end.

"Here!" she set down the petals at the edge of the nest, but Sagepool didn't take his paws away from where he had pinned the leader's head to make sure she didn't hurt herself. Taking the hint, she gathered a small pile and attempted to feed them.

At that moment, Cardinalheart strolled in. He took one look at the situation and rushed to the leader's side, taking the petals and wadding them into a ball. "I saw Ravenflight do this when Mintleaf had a feverish seizure. If I can pack these tight enough, maybe she won't choke on it." he explained hurriedly.

Twistertail stumbled back, barely hearing him over the roar of blood in her ears. Just when her hearing came back, she picked up a screech from behind her. She whirled around, feeling even more adrenaline exploding through her chest. Behind the curtain, Shadowsweep let out a wild cry.

"The leader!" she hissed. "No, it can't be!"

Not a moment later, the healer burst through from where she had been storing the herbs. She shoved aside the three frantic cats, yelling at no one in particular. "This isn't how the ForestClan leader dies! The brambles and hail shall strike down the one who chases a thousand moons!"

Then, the worst possible thing happened next. The leader fell back in her nest, clearly dead. Shadowsweep shook her head, backing up. "Maybe this *is* how she dies. But... Was that another prophecy?"

Cardinalheart, Sagepool, and Twistertail desperately tried to bring back the cream-and-light-brown she-cat, but no amount of frantic yowling would raise her from the dead. Shadowsweep stood idly by as Daisyshine and Lilyspring poked their heads into the den, their eyes widening at the scene.

Twistertail suddenly whirled around, glaring at the healer, who was absentmindedly washing a paw. "Doesn't that go against the healers' rules? You just let a cat die!" she snarled.

Shadowsweep shrugged casually, as if she hadn't just turned her back to the ForestClan leader while she was having a seizure. "Last time I checked, the first rule was about putting prophecies first. I couldn't receive a prophecy with all that screeching, so of course I went to the herb storage where I wouldn't bother anyone. And sure enough, SpiritClan spoke to me. They said 'Brambles and hail shall strike down the one who chases a thousand moons.' That sounds like a reasonably important prophecy to me."

"But we already have an important prophecy!" Twistertail yowled.

"I know." the healer put a paw up, as if the warrior were a kit throwing a tantrum. "Now that Sandystar is dead, I can tell you that I knew she was going to die. I was at the beach when I saw sand being tossed around in the wind. I saw sand being swept away by the waves. And I saw-"

"Why didn't you save her?" the younger she-cat asked more softly, her fury fading somewhat.

"I knew she was going to die. And after all, you're more important, what with being a cat in the prophecy."

Twistertail shook her head. None of this made sense. She turned away from the senior healer, watching in a dazed state as Daisyshine and Lilyspring shooed back the other concerned cats from crowding their mother. *Why did Shadowsweep let her die if the future already seems so dark?*

Chapter Thirty-Four

"What?! It was one time, moons ago! I didn't mean to, I swear! And Squirrelstrike-" Mousefall wailed.

Parsleyshade shook her head sadly from her perch on the leader's tree. "Sorry, Mousefall. But any time a cat willingly visits the Frozen Forest, they must go to the Moonpond to take a vow." she was gentle, but firm. "Thank you, Twistertail, for informing us of this."

The black-and-white she-cat let out a breath she was holding anxiously. Parsleyshade had just announced a trip to the Moonpond to officially make her a leader, so obviously she took the chance to fulfill her commitment to Onyx-eye.

"Don't worry, brother. I'll go with you." Squirrelstrike gave him a flick with her tail. Mousefall and Twistertail were yet again sitting next to each other, but the young warrior couldn't read the expression on his face. Was he hurt? Sad? Angry? She couldn't tell. But the important thing was that the two were soon going to meet their mother and father.

Twistertail shifted her paws, careful not to disturb the grass. It was almost moonhigh, and she had waited patiently for Sandystar and Sagepool to fall asleep with their paws in the icy water. Mousefall and Squirrelstrike were awake as planned, watching over the leader and healer. But what she didn't expect was the new deputy Basilfang, assigned to guard the four cats.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Basilfang shifted closer to his brother and sister, hunching over and closing his eyes. After a few comically short moments, he began to snore. Twistertail counted to the highest number imaginable before creeping forwards to her targets.

"Mousefall! Squirrelstrike! I need to talk to you!" she hissed.

Mousefall whipped his head around in surprise, but then glared venomously at her. "I don't want to hear your apology, Twistertail. You ratted me out for something that was't even my fault, and for no reason! Why would you do such a thing, especially after all these moons we've been friends?" he whispered furiously. Apparently he was still mad at her.

"It wasn't for no reason. I needed to bring you two here because you're going to meet your parents." Twistertail explained.

Squirrelstrike glanced back at the three sleeping cats across the small pond. "You mean... Twistedbramble and Ratchaser? But they were exiled within our first moon of apprenticeship." she recounted.

A high-pitched voice suddenly scrambled Twistertail's train of thought. "Yes, they were exiled. But they're still eager to meet you. It's only a short walk away to where they are." Onyx-eye purred, stepping forwards from under the waterfall. For a moment, only the white patch on her chest was visible, but then she stepped into the moonlight.

Squirrelstrike seemed to return to her old ways as she leaped to her paws, teeth bared and fur bristling. "Who are you, and what do you want?" she snarled.

"Relax, you guys. I'm Onyx-eye, here to help Twistertail reunite you with your parents." the scrawny black cat announced as she wove her way towards the three ForestClan warriors.

Mousefall looked hopeful, stepping towards the strange CliffClan she-cat. "Really? You're going to take us to meet our parents?"

Onyx-eye let out an unnecessarily evil, high-pitched laugh that echoed around the clearing, causing Basilfang to stir in his sleep. "Oh, not just parents. You're meeting your entire family."

"Finally!" Twistedbramble sprang forwards, her tail held high. "There they are!" she practically screeched.

Onyx-eye and Twistertail hung back, watching the two siblings as

they were pulled into an embrace by their mother. Ratchaser soon followed, nuzzling his kits gratefully. Twistedbramble raised her head after a long moment of smothering her children in fluff. "Thank you so much. This... This means a lot to me. We've been coming here every night for moons..."

After an even longer moment, Ratchaser broke away from the group hug. The tall tom pricked his ears towards the two warriors, thinking of something to say. "So... You two want to come in? We have fish, if you'd like." the grayish-brown cat offered.

Onyx-eye grinned widely, standing up to follow. "Thanks, Ratchaser. I haven't eaten since this morning!"

Twistertail trailed along more slowly, hesitating with each step. "So... Where exactly have you been sheltering?" she prodded.

Ratchaser pointed his tail upstream, where the CliffClan and RockClan territories ended. "We've been camping out in a cave and eating fish." he explained. "It's just a little ways from the RockClan border."

Twistertail turned to Onyx-eye, a thought forming in her head- something she should have thought of long ago. "Sister... Have you visited them?"

Onyx-eye snorted so loudly it echoed. "Visited them? I practically live here! You didn't catch on that I see them, like, every day? That's why I didn't show up in the Frozen Forest that often."

"Oh." the black-and-white warrior looked down at her paws. Of course Onyx-eye had been visiting the exiled cats. Why hadn't it occurred to her? She was never one to pay attention to details.

"We're here! Welcome to our humble home!" Ratchaser suddenly picked up speed, disappearing over a rise that signaled the end of RockClan territory. Here, there was a depression in the ground where the water collected, then continued the Moonstream.

A small cave overlooked the thin shore, where Twistedbramble's three children sat patiently in the shadow of the rock. Twistertail

recognized them by now- the pale ginger-spotted she-cat was Snakelash, the pale tabby was Viperstrike, and their older brother was Rattleshake, a darker ginger tabby. The spotted she-cat stood up as soon as she saw her two younger siblings coming around the corner.

"Finally!" Snakelash purred, stepping forwards with her tail held high. In many ways, she closely resembled her mother.

Squirrelstrike darted in front of her brother, narrowing her eyes. "Is that... Snakelash? Is that you?" she growled in confusion.

"Of course it is! Don't you recognize your sisters and brother?" Twistedbramble waved her tail at the three tabbies.

"Um... I think." Squirrelstrike leaned back a bit, studying the strange cats. "That's Snakelash, and I'm pretty sure you're Viperstrike... Weren't you going to mentor me?"

"I was." the paler cat said simply, not even bothering to stand up at her siblings' arrival.

"And... Who's the other one?" Mousefall asked timidly, stepping out from where he had been crouched beside Squirrelstrike.

"I'm Rattleshake." the ginger tom said matter-of-factly from where he was perched further back on a boulder.

"What kind of name is that?" Squirrelstrike wrinkled her nose.

"You know... Like the rattle on a rattlesnake?" the tom almost rolled his eyes.

Twistedbramble put a paw on her daughter's shoulder. "My younger sibling's name was Snakefang. I decided to name my first litter after snakes, and my second litter after rodents, as a tribute to Ratchaser. And my third litter will be named after spiky plants, like me. Hopefully, that is. If we make it to new-leaf. But I don't know, since I'll be giving birth any day now." the she-cat put a paw on her fluffy stomach.

"You're pregnant?" Mousefall's expression turned to joy. "More

siblings?"

Ratchaser suddenly returned from out of seemingly nowhere, carrying a greenish-colored fish. He set it down at his mate's paws. "Look what I just caught! It's a big one, too!"

Twistertail narrowed her eyes at it. "Isn't it against the Valley Cat Code to fish in the sacred Moonstream? That would upset SpiritClan!"

Ratchaser shook his head, smiling. "We don't live on Clan territory, so we don't follow the Code. And neither me or Rattleshake believe in SpiritClan. We fish here nearly every day, don't we! Why don't you come in and see our pile of fish!" he waved his tail at the cave behind him.

The two black-and-white she-cats looked at each other, then nodded. Twistertail had eaten before she left, but Onyx-eye seemed to be hungry. They followed Ratchaser into the dark space, which was about a moose-length deep, an otter-length wide, and a hare-height tall. Twistertail was about to paw at the pile of fish when she saw yellow eyes staring back at her.

"Gah!" she jumped back as another cat, a dark gray tabby, materialized from the stone. She immediately recognized him as Darkcloud. It was either him or Obsidian-eye who could be her father, and like Snowspirit, she planned to be on his good side. But it was difficult, as Darkcloud wasn't the nicest cat to be around.

"So you're finally here. It took you about half a year, though. What have you been doing?" he prodded, his voice dangerously gentle.

"Uh... You know. ForestClan warrior stuff." Twistertail managed. She quickly looked down, hooking a small, pale fish with a claw and escorting it outside into the open air, where she could breathe again. Onyx-eye was devouring a massive fish as she watched Ratchaser and Twistedbramble reunite the two warriors with their older siblings.

"So, what do you think of Darkcloud?" Onyx-eye asked casually, licking her muzzle free of any scales. "I know he's pretty creepy and

condescending, but once you get to know him, you'll see how intelligent and thoughtful he is."

Twistertail looked down at her pale fish, which was only as long as her paw. "What do you mean, intelligent and thoughtful?"

Onyx-eye shifted uncomfortably for a heartbeat. "Now, don't jump to conclusions, but... He's insanely good at battle strategy. There were a bunch of rogues here when they were first kicked out, but not anymore. Not to mention how Twistedbramble and Ratchaser go on about how glorious he was when he was deputy."

Shoving aside her fish, Twistertail glanced over her shoulder to see if those eerie yellow eyes were still watching. "...Glorious? How so?" she pried.

Her sister swallowed the small fish in one go. The black cat blinked a few times before answering. "Well, his mother Marblestar was getting old when he became the deputy after leading ForestClan to victory and reclaiming a bunch of territory they had lost to WoodClan. But then he began to push the border, and forced younger and younger cats to fight. Finally, when nearly every warrior and apprentice had been damaged in some way, the legendary Flickerfur declared him to be dangerous to all Clans."

"Really? Then how did he get exiled if he was that dangerous?"

"When he went to the Moonpond after killing his mother, SpiritClan refused to give him his gift. As you know, they can hold back their graciousness if they feel the cat isn't the best choice to lead their Clan. In this case, the former deputy who'd retired made a comeback. I think it was Poppypelt or something. Anyways, Poppystar exiled him, and Ratchaser decided to leave with him. Of course, Twistedbramble wanted to go with her mate and her three older children, who are still Darkcloud's biggest supporters."

"Didn't Twistedbramble have young kits when she left?" Twistertail hissed.

"That's what I mean when I said intelligent. You see, Mintleaf wanted to be a permanent queen, but instead Darkcloud sent her

into battle and told the healers to not treat her wounds. They got infected, and she had some kind of seizure and died. Not to mention Snakefang, Twistedbramble's younger sibling who was killed in combat. And near the end of his reign of terror, Darkcloud sent her kits into battle, and Marmotpaw died. But he told Twistedbramble he had run off on their first night away from ForestClan."

"If Darkcloud is such a terrible cat, why are you still around him!" Twistertail spat. Her sister was telling of all the wicked deeds her father had done, but she spoke of him as if he were to be respected.

"Snowspirit became his mate so that he'd like her. Even if he isn't our father, it'd still be wise to be on his good side. He has plans to re-enter ForestClan, and when that happens, I don't want him to be clawing my fur off." Onyx-eye shrugged.

In the awkward silence that followed, Ratchaser trotted up to them. "Hello, Onyx-eye. And Twistertail, too. Did you get enough to eat?"

Onyx-eye nodded joyfully. "Of course we did! I can stay longer, but Squirrelstrike and Mousefall should probably be getting back soon."

Ratchaser nodded vigorously. "I see. That's what Twistedbramble was just saying. But we had a suggestion. What if -just because she's heavily pregnant and we don't want her giving birth out here- What if she goes with you, back to ForestClan? Just her, and not me or her older kits. And just for the first two moons or so."

Twistertail glanced behind him to Mousefall and Squirrelstrike, who were listening intently. Mousefall stepped forwards, the weight of the decision vividly displayed in his fiery amber eyes. "Come on, Twistertail. Don't fight us over this. You aren't going to let her give birth in the cold on the edge of the StoneClan borders, are you?" he pleaded.

Twistertail shrugged. "It isn't my decision. But I guess we'll see."

"What was that?" Sagepool turned around, scanning the rocks for any sign of life. The healer had been staring at the reflections of him and his siblings, but now he was on high alert. Onyx-eye and

Twistertail were hidden, but Mousefall and Squirrelstrike kept walking forwards, as they were expected. Twistedbramble trailed behind them.

"I'm sure it was nothing, Sagepool. But we should probably be heading back- Oh, Squirrelstrike! And Mousefall, too! Where have you been?" Basilfang raised his tail in greeting when he spotted the two warriors.

"We went upstream and met a heavily pregnant queen who wishes to shelter in ForestClan to give birth to her kits." Squirrelstrike glanced back at the fluffy tabby. "And she's also our mother."

"Then by all means, you must come with us." the ForestClan leader dipped her head. "We will always welcome a cat in need."

"Oh, thank you!" Twistedbramble chirped. "And to who do I owe the honor?"

Basilfang shared a glance with his sister before shaking his head sadly. "Unfortunately, you can call her Parsleyshade instead of Parsleystar. SpiritClan has denied her the gift of a leader." he said sorrowfully.

At that moment, Onyx-eye stepped forwards. "I have a solution!" she declared loudly.

"Um... Onyx-eye, isn't it? Have we lingered on the border for too long?" Parsleyshade looked confused.

"I said, I have a solution! I know a cat who can lead ForestClan!" the black cat proposed.

Sagepool stepped closer. "Really? I've had visions of all our warriors failing to lead the Clan. Who do you think could lead us?" he asked, almost in disbelief.

"Darkcloud!"

At that moment, the dark tom stepped forwards, Ratchaser following closely. Parleyshade and Basilfang seemed to bristle, both growling menacingly.

"Darkcloud! I've heard many tales of the bloodshed of which you are responsible for. I won't let you anywhere near these sacred waters!" Parsleyshade hissed.

"Oh, alright. I guess we'll never know if ForestClan will have a leader. Such a shame." the dark gray tabby purred.

Sagepool glanced around before letting his tail flop down to the ground. "This may be our only chance. If Darkcloud receives a leaders' gift, then-"

"She was right! Magpiepelt was right!" Onyx-eye crowed. "For once in her life, she did something useful!"

Twistertail stood up to growl at her sister. "Is this some kind of plan you thought up? To make Darkcloud the leader of ForestClan?" she accused.

"Oh, no, silly. This was all in the first prophecy Magpiepelt received. That's how she became a healer's apprentice."

Parsleyshade gave Twistertail an odd look. "Were you... Were you with us when we left?" she prodded.

The warrior dipped her head, not meaning to touch moonlight until the leader had returned home with her warriors- and new queen, of course. Now, Darkcloud placed his muzzle in the water and curled up neatly, leaving the others in an awkward silence.

"Well, that's my cue to go. But I'll see you around, won't I?" Onyx-eye turned to leave. Before Twistertail could say anything, the black cat had disappeared into the night. The warrior shifted to face the ForestClan cats.

"I was going to reunite Mousefall and Squirrelstrike with their parents. I didn't know Twistedbramble was pregnant, or Darkcloud might become leader. And of course, I had no idea Onyx-eye was in on his plan, or that Magpiepelt had some kind of prophecy about this." she said honestly. "All I wanted to do was-"

"That's alright, Twistertail. Now all we can do is wait for a sign." Parsleyshade soothed.

The younger warrior sat back, watching Ratchaser nuzzle his mate. Eventually, they sat down next to Mousefall and Squirrelstrike, who suggested names for her children. Finally, as the air began to turn blue, Darkcloud lifted his muzzle from the Moonpond.

"Well? What did they say?" Parsleyshade demanded.

The old tom yawned and stretched luxuriously, taking his sweet time. "The stars have spoken." he purred.

"And? Did they accept you, Darkcloud?" Sagepool pricked his ears in anticipation of his answer.

"You can call me Darkstar, the newest leader of ForestClan." the gray cat replied.

"Can I come in? Is she ready?" Ratchaser asked desperately.

Sagepool poked his head out of the nursery. The healer looked tired, as if he hadn't slept in days. He probably hadn't, ever since Twistedbramble's kits were born. "You guys can come in now. But don't crowd them." he ordered.

Ratchaser sprang forwards, immediately locating his mate and rushing towards her. Twistedbramble was curled up in a cloud of moss, sheltering her three newborn kits. Twistertail followed more slowly, and hung back as Mousefall and Squirrelstrike got a good look.

"So, aren't you going to congratulate me?" a voice sounded behind her. Twistertail whirled around to see Brightspirit laying in another mossy nest, his two kits nestled deep into his fluffy fur.

"About your kits getting named? Yes, I did." Twistertail rolled her eyes at her brother. "Or your mate having new siblings? I'm pretty sure that had plenty of fanfare."

"No, you never said anything about me becoming deputy, and it's been a quarter-moon already. I thought you'd be the first cat to-"

"Yeah, I'm sorry I got crowded out by all the other cats running to admire your unearned achievement." she snapped. Brightspirit

narrowed his eyes, curling his fluffy tail in anger.

"I just thought you... I don't know. You don't compliment me anymore. It's like you're drifting away while I'm taking off." his irritation turned to a soft sadness. "My dreams are coming true, but... you never said anything about it. Sure, I had all the senior warriors telling me how great I was. But I just wanted to make sure you still like me."

"Of course I still like you! But you were so annoying as an apprentice, always bragging and starting fights and stuff. You haven't grown out of it yet, if you ever will. But I've always been there to comfort you, and I won't leave anytime soon." she leaned down to nuzzle her brother.

"Are you sure? You still think I'm going to be the greatest leader and live a thousand moons and make everyone bow to me?"

"Think?" Twistertail laughed merrily. "I *know* you'll be the greatest."

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Brambles and hail shall strike down the one who chases a thousand moons? That's a rather vague prophecy. What was the other one, about darkness?" Darkstar pried, reaching for another snail.

"Uh... Something about the brightest star. I mean, obviously that's me, because Brightstar and everything." Brightspirit piped up.

Darkstar shot his son a glare. "If you become leader, that is. Surely you know which one I'm talking about?" he turned to Twistertail, who was watching the two toms eat snails between the roots of the leader's tree.

"Many will wield the light as they search the shadows, but there will be one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star." Twistertail recited dutifully.

"Ah, yes. Thank you, daughter." Darkstar purred luxuriously. "What do you think it's about?"

Twistertail shrugged, scrambling for a break. "Well, I'd start by looking for names. 'Light' could be referring to Daisyshine, Brightspirit, Finchflame, Duskkit, Sparkkit, Mapleblaze of MireClan, Brackenburn of MeadowClan, Saffronsmolder of GroveClan, and various cats of CliffClan, such as Glimmermist, Glistershine, Dawnlight, Glowheart, Lightningstripe, Glowheart, and possibly Snowspirit. And we should keep in mind the Clan leaders, since the suffix 'star' is often associated with light."

"Brilliant!" Darkstar praised. "You know, maybe I should have made you deputy instead of Brightspirit. But what if he is the brightest star? What would the prophecy mean by 'brambles and hail'?"

Her father was asking the deputy, but he was staring straight into Twistertail's soul. The she-cat squirmed beneath her fur, reluctantly giving her opinion. "The 'brambles' could be referring to any spiky plant, which could be... Thornspike, Rosepaw, possibly Berrykit, Nettlesting and Rootsnag of WoodClan, maybe Petalpaw from MireClan, possibly Vinetrail, Pricklepelt, Hollykit, and Larchneedle from RockClan, Tanglethicket and any of her four kits in GroveClan, and Brindleberry from DeltaClan."

"That's wonderful. An entire ocean of names." she couldn't tell if Darkstar was being sarcastic. "Now, what is the newest one?"

"Oh, that's easy. The brightest light will chase the darkest dark." Brightspirit recited proudly. "Moonsweep was in a lot of pain with that one. I think that's what made her go crazy, if she wasn't already."

"Yes, yes. But that could basically mean anything. What do you think, Twistertail?" Darkstar prodded coldly.

"I think it may be about the Frozen Forest and the Sacred Sky. But really, it could be anything."

"Me and Crowpelt will think about it. Brightspirit, why don't you finish these snails for me?" the leader offered.

The white tom seized the shell of snails in his paws, greedily chowing down on them. Twistertail stood up, growling in irritation. "Seriously, Brightspirit? You were supposed to be organizing the dusk patrol ages ago! Your warriors are waiting!" she waved her tail at the paw-ful of warriors who were not-so-patiently hovering by the camp entrance.

"Oh. Right." her brother reluctantly stood and walked across the camp to be greeted by their various stares. The older warriors were frustrated, while the younger ones were excited, with or without irritation from the deputy's poor management. While Twistertail had patrolled with Rosepaw and trained her for combat all day, Purslanepaw had stayed up all night and was just now waking up.

"Alright, I'll take Purslanepaw and Mousefall, with his apprentice

Thrushpaw. And also, Daisyshine." Brightspirit was stepping towards the entrance when Robinsong let out a hiss. "You forgot the other patrol! And where are you going, anyways?"

"Oh, um... I'm going to the lake and the MireClan and GroveClan borders. And Twistertail will organize the other patrol." the white tom shrugged.

Twistertail gritted her teeth, turning towards the warriors. "Well, it looks like I'm organizing a patrol to the Twoleg border while Brightspirit goes to the lake. How about... Basilfang and Berrypaw, plus Finchflame and Robinsong?" she proposed.

"Slow down, Berrypaw! We need to mark these trees, not just run past them!" Basilfang yowled.

Berrypaw circled around back to his mentor, grinning widely. "So... What are those marks on the trees?" he asked enthusiastically.

"That's how WoodClan cats permanently mark their territory. Just leave your scent on trees that don't have those claw-marks on them." Mousefall explained.

Up ahead, Finchflame gave Twistertail a playful shove, startling the black-and-white warrior. "What?!" she snapped.

"Woah. I was just going to ask you a stupid question!" he chuckled.

"Oh. What?"

"...Do you like kits?"

"I don't know. I mean, they're pretty cute when they're young. Like, when their eyes aren't open. But then they start talking and bouncing around all over the place, then they grow into apprentices and start doing stuff. I can hardly stand my childish and ignorant brother. He's been the deputy for a half-moon now, and he clearly isn't willing to do the hard work." she ranted.

Finchflame hung back, looking like he regretted even talking to her.

"Sorry. It's just, I need to get away from my terrible family. And I guess I do like kits, but not if they're going to be annoying like some I've met so far." Twistertail said, embarrassed.

"Oh, yeah. I was so energetic as a kit. And apprentice, too. I always had this dumb daydream of being, like, the greatest leader of all time. But now, I see that just being a Clan warrior takes a lot of work. I'm happy just how I am. I've got a cool family and great friends, like Daisyshine and Squirrelstrike. Plus, I've got a crush on the most beautiful and smart cat in the whole Clan."

Twistertail snorted. "Yeah, you've got all the ladies. Who could that possibly be?"

"I'm looking at her." If it was even possible, Finchflame grinned even wider.

"Um... Finchflame?"

"Yeah?"

"We're standing on WoodClan territory."

"Oh." the tom stepped to the side a few tail-lengths so that the pair were back on their land. The cream-and-ginger cat shuffled awkwardly, avoiding eye contact of any kind. Twistertail felt a warm feeling in her chest, but it wasn't anger or embarrassment.

"So... About that crush? I think she likes you back. Maybe you should get together sometime." she purred.

Finchflame's head shot up. "Really?"

Just as Twistertail recognized the warm feeling as a brewing romance, a voice shattered their conversation. "Twistertail! Come look at this!" Basilfang yowled from a few moose-lengths behind them. Robinsong and Berrypaw were craning their necks up to look at something that clearly upset them.

Twistertail trotted up to see claw-marks high up on a tree. "Those weren't there when I was on the dawn patrol with Rosepaw." she confirmed.

"What do we do?" Berrypaw piped up.

"We should retaliate! They'll regret marking the wrong tree!" Robinsong snarled.

"Twistertail? What do you think?" Basilfang turned to the black-and-white she-cat.

"I'll report this to Brightspirit and Darkstar. Or even better, someone who will handle this properly." the warrior promised.

"What?! WoodClan marking on ForestClan trees?!" Darkstar roared.

"It was only one." Twistertail stated. "Maybe we should let them have it."

"*Let them have it?* You're just going to let them get away with stealing our territory? If anyone ever dares mock my Clan, I'll make them regret it for the next thousand moons!" the leader yowled impossibly louder, causing even more concerned glances from around the otherwise-peaceful, moonlit camp.

"Yeah, we should attack them!" Brightspirit unsheathed his claws. "What should we do?"

Darkstar pressed a paw to the bridge of his nose, thinking for a moment. "It wouldn't make sense to go to their camp. Organize some warriors to wait for their moonlight patrol. We'll ambush them at the scene of their intrusion." he ordered.

"Okay, Twistertail. Who's going?" Brightspirit turned to his sister, claws still proudly displayed.

"You're the deputy! Do it yourself!" she snapped. "I'm not going to follow you around and do the work for you. I'm going to bed, Brightspirit."

"Alright, I guess I'll take Purslanepaw, and Sparrowspots, maybe? He isn't a good fighter, but he does what he's told. But Robinsong'll send 'em running, all right. And Daisyshine is always cool." Brightspirit rambled.

Twistertail finally snapped, whipping her head to glare at Darkstar. "Did you make him in charge just to mess with me? To make me do you guys' dirty work? And to see if I'd catch on?"

"Don't you need to do more around here?" he reasoned.

He was right, and she hated it. "Fine, I'll do the stupid ambush. But not because you want me to or because Brightspirit is terrible at his job."

Lemonspice was one of the fiercest warriors of WoodClan, but she was slow. Her patrol seemed to idle as she took her sweet time, sniffing every blade of frosty grass along the ForestClan border.

Twistertail recognized the other three cats on the patrol as Applesprout, Leafspeckle, and her apprentice Almondpaw. Leafspeckle was a beautiful she-cat, and Twistertail felt a stab of guilt that she had been ordered to attack these cats, possibly scarring that pretty pelt.

"That's Almondpaw, isn't it? I think I saw him at the last gathering, but he was really shy." Pumpkinpelt recalled.

"Yes, but look at Leafspeckle! How is she possibly wearing that flower behind her ear?" Twistertail whispered back.

"Rats, I wish relationships between Clans were allowed in ForestClan! I would *so* walk up to her and ask her out." Pumpkinpelt giggled. Twistertail felt like an apprentice again, gossiping about all the attractive cats. But unfortunately, she was here for one reason- to fight.

As she looked around at the four other warriors -Squirrelstrike, Lilyspring, Pumpkinpelt, and Parsleyshade- she felt a cold realization, as if she had taken a dive straight into the middle of the Moonpond. These cats were waiting for her command, and the patrol was almost past them.

"Attack!" she yowled, leaping out of the bushes. She darted towards the reddish pelt of Applesprout, who had somewhat strayed from the rest of the patrol. Twistertail flew off the ground, driving her

paws straight into his side and clinging tightly, rolling over and into ForestClan territory. Thinking fast, she sprang away to avoid any retaliation before whirling around, swiping blindly with her claws.

She felt a rush of victory as she connected with his red-tabby shoulder. The young tom quickly surged to his paws, whipping his head around as Twistertail danced to the side, keeping him clueless. When the WoodClan warrior finally leaped at her, she sprang straight up in the air and twisted sharply to dig her claws into the soft part just behind his shoulders- a move she had learned from Squirrelstrike, who was also quick on her feet.

Before Applesprout could even think of his next move, she darted away to run through the dark forest. She sprinted a few moose-lengths before circling around to see Pumpkinpelt and Lilyspring following.

"They all scattered, but I think Almondpaw ran into ForestClan territory, towards the lake. Should we go after him?" Lilyspring reported.

"No," Twistertail panted. "We've done enough."

"Darkstar, I told you we wouldn't find them!" Twistertail lashed her long tail in anger. Ever since she had reported back to her father, he had demanded to bring uninjured warriors in search of the WoodClan apprentice. "It's almost dawn! He's probably run back home by now." she hissed.

Darkstar was literally turning over rocks on the beach, as if the small apprentice could be hiding under one of them. "We should all spread out." he grunted. "Don't stop looking!'

Robinsong, Crowpelt, and Twistertail branched off, each choosing a different direction. While Crowpelt walked along the shore, Twistertail chose to search the dunes for a dusky brown pelt. The air had turned a misty gray, and the sound of waves on the beach was eerily echoing in the last moments of the night. Twistertail was almost to the MireClan border when she trotted over a dune only to step on a fluffed-out brown pelt.

"Sorry! I know I'm on ForestClan territory, please don't hurt me!" Almondpaw pleaded.

"I won't hurt you. The both of you, that is. I've been up for a day straight doing stupid patrols and attacks for my idiot brother. But I wouldn't hurt you." Twistertail said, trying to sound gentle.

"Really? You're not mad I'm on your territory?" the apprentice's eyes were wide in the light of the almost-full moon. "But... You attacked our patrol!" he shrank back against the sand.

"That was just because I was stepping in for my brother. Why don't we walk back to WoodClan together? I'll make sure none of those senior warriors see you." she offered. Almondpaw nodded vigorously, sticking close to her side as she began the hike back westward.

"Sorry I ran into your territory. I thought maybe if I went to the beach and hid until sunrise, no one would notice and I wouldn't get in trouble. I mean, cats from other Clans walk on our beach when they need to. But it was a stupid idea, especially after a battle." Almondpaw explained nervously.

"It wasn't stupid. That was a great idea. And I wouldn't call it a battle, it was more of a revenge-ambush."

"Revenge? For what?"

"This evening, my patrol saw a tree that had been incorrectly marked by WoodClan. It wasn't actually a big deal, but when I told my father he ordered us to attack the moonlight patrol. But everyone knows he's just prickly to WoodClan because of this crazy war he fought against them."

"Oh. That sounds like someone from a horror story the elders would scare us with to keep us in camp. They said there was an evil cat called Darkheart who would claw our faces off if we went into his territory."

"Horror story? That's literally my life." Twistertail chuckled. Her father was so evil that WoodClan had made up a nursery tale about

him!

"Twistertail? Who are you talking to?" Crowpelt's voice rang out into the dunes. Almondpaw crouched low, and Twistertail moved so that he was mostly hidden when her former mentor appeared over the sand. "Did you find him?" the tall tom growled.

"No, I think he may have gone into the forest." she lied.

The dark tom narrowed his eyes. "Then why do I smell WoodClan?"

"We were just in a border conflict. Of course you smell WoodClan."

"Then why do I see the apprentice hiding behind those skinny legs of yours?"

Curse these long, skinny legs. "Run!" she yowled at the frightened young tom. Almondpaw took off towards the distant forest, but he had sprinted barely a moose-length when Darkstar appeared out of nowhere, pinning the apprentice with one of his paws.

"Well, he was on the beach after all." the dark tabby commented.

"It's him! It's Darkheart, the evil cat from the story!" Almondpaw wailed.

"It's Dark*star*, for your information. Now tell me, Almondpaw, how long have you been mentored by Leafspeckle?"

"Um... I think four days, sir." the brown cat whimpered.

"Ah, yes. Make sure to say hello to Stemtail for me, would you?"

"Who-Who's Stemtail, sir?"

"The deputy. Before I killed him, that is."

"Wha-"

With that, Darkstar dug his claws into the young tom's soft underside. After a moment of reveling in the evil deed, he picked up the WoodClan apprentice by the scruff and carried his as though he

were a frightened and hurt kit- which he was.

Almondpaw let out a frail hiss before Darkstar placed him on the smooth, cool sand that practically glowed in the early sunlight. At first there were a few drops of blood, but as the waves drenched the young tom with icy water, the lake began to run red.

Twistertail stared in shock, not moving a paw for a few long moments. Darkstar was watching as the kit bled to death! She had to do something to stop this. She broke into a run towards the dark gray beast, but he turned around before she was within pouncing range. His bloodstained muzzle was twisted into a snarl.

"Don't you dare," he growled. "Or that will be you. Right, brother?"

Twistertail looked desperately to her former mentor. The old tom was cold and cruel, but surely he wouldn't stand by while this kind of crime took place, would he? Crowpelt stared back, one side of his pelt illuminated by the rising sun. The young warrior was effectively trapped between the two senior warriors.

"I hope you'll understand that once we show any sign of weakness, they will strike." Crowpelt snarled. "If we had let that kit invade our territory and live to tell the tale-"

"Letting him go isn't weakness! It's common sense!" Twistertail yowled. She could see Darkstar's shadow as the ForestClan leader shook his head gravely.

"If you know anything about common sense, you'll do exactly as your told and destroy our enemies. Even if they're apprentices on the fourth day of training." Darkstar growled. He hitched his head at Crowpelt before the two headed back to where they had originally started their search. Twistertail whirled around and darted into the bloodstained water, briefly blinded by the rising sun that streaked colors across the golden sky.

"Almondpaw? Almondpaw! *Almondpaw!*" she yowled out his name, but the poor kit had been swept away by the receding tide, never to be seen again.

She knew something was off when she first started up the hill. The stench of blood hadn't cleared from her nose, but it should have.

"Why do I smell more WoodClan?" Darkstar grunted.

"I don't know. It does seem to be pretty strong up here. Maybe it's from the pelts of the cats who ambushed that moonlight patrol." Crowpelt suggested.

"What if they attacked us?" Robinsong snarled. "That would explain how strong the scent is near our camp."

Twistertail wanted to say something, but she was too tired and rattled to do anything when the senior warriors suddenly took off, leaving her to hike uphill alone for the last few moose-lengths. An ominous bloodstain stood out from the hollow log. Even more ominously, it was fresh.

Inside, the stench of death reigned over the camp. Several cats were dead, with others injured. Twistertail tried to take in everything, but her head was begging for sleep. Darkstar's furious yowling just made everything worse.

"WoodClan!" he roared. "They'll pay for this!'

Updated Allegiances- Act Three Part Two

ForestClan:

Leader: Darkstar- Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: Brightspirit- Large white tom with black paws and ears, pale yellow eyes

(Apprentice: Purslanepaw)

Healers:

Shadowsweep- Black-and-white she-cat with pale blue eyes

Sagepool- Cream-colored tom with pale green eyes

Mosscurl- Tabby-and-white she-cat, green eyes

Warriors:

Crowpelt- Dark gray tom, white points and pale blue eyes

Ratchaser- Battle-scarred, grayish-brown tom with orange eyes

Robinsong- Giant reddish-orange she-cat, yellow eyes

Parsleyshade- Ginger tabby she-cat, amber eyes

(Apprentice: Berrypaw)

Mousefall- Large, pale tabby tom with fiery orange eyes

(Apprentice: Thrushpaw)

Snakelash- Pale ginger speckled she-cat with golden eyes

Viperstrike- Pale tabby she-cat with white points and orange eyes

Lilyspring- White she-cat with pale yellow eyes, deaf in one ear

Twistertail- Black-and-white she-cat with pale green eyes

(Apprentice: Rosepaw)

Finchflame- Cream-and-ginger tom, yellow eyes

Sparrowspots- Reddish-brown speckled tom, deep golden eyes

Ambereyes- Pale tabby she-cat with intensely amber eyes

Apprentices:

Thrushpaw- speckled light brown tom, orange eyes

Purslanepaw- tabby tom, dark green eyes

Berrypaw- dark tabby cat with golden eyes

Rosepaw- orange tabby she-cat with solid yellow eyes

Queens:

Cardinalheart- Reddish tom, deep golden eyes

Squirrelstrike- Dusky ginger she-cat, amber eyes

Twistedbramble- Pale tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Pumpkinpelt- Large, fluffy ginger she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Kits:

Squirrelstrike and Brightspirit: *Duskkit, Sparkkit*

Twistedbramble and Ratchaser: *Chamomilekit, Cilantrokit, Oreganokit*

Elders:

Pigeonwhisker

Nightfeather

Stormsong

Chapter Thirty-Six

Twistertail glanced around nervously at the DeltaClan and ConiferClan cats. They eyed the new ForestClan leader as he took his place on the bench alongside the other two toms. Brightspirit proudly claimed a spot on the ledge beneath his father, once again puffing out his already-fluffy chest.

"Are those the other apprentices?" Rosepaw waved her tail at the dark green bushes at the right side of the clearing.

"No, those are the elders." Twistertail joked.

"Really?" the tabby looked confused.

"No, silly. Now go on and introduce yourself." her mentor gave her a gentle nudge in the general direction of the young cats. Just as the smaller cat trotted off with her brother Purslanepaw by her side, Twistertail heard her name being called.

"Twistertail! You got an apprentice!" Lemmingleap praised.

The black-and-white warrior turned around to touch whiskers with her closest GroveClan friend. "Yes, I did. And you did, too! What a coincidence!"

"That's Leafpaw, my apprentice of two moons. They were just about to go visit with the other apprentices." Lemmingleap swiveled an ear to the speckled brown cat behind her.

"Hi, I'm Leafpaw. You're Twistertail, right?" the young cat asked.

"Yes, that's me. Have you met Rosepaw yet? She's one of the most agreeable cats I've seen."

"Oh... Is that her right there?" Leafpaw pointed their tail at the pretty ForestClan apprentice, who was listening to the GroveClan

healer's apprentice Mintpaw tell some story.

"Don't be shy, Leafpaw. Go talk to her." Lemmingleap prodded. As the young tom wandered off, the dark brown she-cat angled towards the warriors' cluster of trees. "So, we've got some catching up to do. Sorry I haven't been to the last three gatherings, I've been so busy with my new mate and apprentice."

"Really? Who?" Twistertail demanded, sitting down abruptly under a tree and pricking her ears to hear her friend's answer.

"I'll give you a hint. It's a she-cat, from a nearby Clan that allows cross-Clan romance."

"It isn't Nectarstream or Bloomspots, right?"

"She's not that attractive, but she's fiesty and energetic. You've met her before, actually. I'd consider you two to be close friends. She and Adderlash are always hanging around each other."

"Wait. It's Orioleflight?" Twistertail giggled. "But you guys are like fire and ice!"

Lemmingleap shrugged, ducking her head. "Yes, we do argue a bit more than usual. I like to keep things simple and humble, but she's... enthusiastic. And proud. And compassionate..."

Twistrtail glanced around to spot the fiery ConiferClan she-cat, but before she could effectively search the crowd of warriors, Sedgestar's yowl sounded from the leaders' perch. She focused her eyes on the bench, eagerly awaiting their reports.

"Cats of all Clans, lend us your ears! The gathering has begun!" the old tom sat down, glaring at everyone at the same time. "As you can see, Darkstar has become the new leader, but while we had recently claimed the grassy border as our own, he insists on patrolling our land. So, just because you're a new leader, I'll spare you from my wrath and let you off with a warning." the MireClan leader growled.

"Any cat who trespasses onto our land will be... deal with properly." Sedgestar grunted. "Aside from that, we have four new apprentices who are attending the gathering tonight. Please

welcome Frostpaw, Hailpaw, Iciclepaw, and Mistpaw."

"ConiferClan hasn't had any changes in names, but we shall give a warning to MeadowClan that we chased away a beaver from our shore, and it might have run across the Fieldstream to their territory."

"Yes, we absolutely *slaughtered* that beaver! My son and apprentice Hawkpaw was the one to cut its throat. No need to be concerned, Ospreystar! MeadowClan handled that horrid beast! Anyways, We named some new kits. They're Cowkit- No, wait. It's Horsekit, Goatkit... Um, and two others. I think it's Boarkit and, like, Roosterkit or something? Henkit? Chickkit?"

"We have two new apprentices in GroveClan. I myself am mentoring Woolypaw and Wolfstride is mentoring Sheeppaw. Other than that, two raccoons have been spotted on our twoleg border. Have you come across them, Darkstar?"

"No, we haven't run into any raccoons, but a few days ago WoodClan marked on our territory. We ambushed their moonlight patrol, but they launched an attack on our camp. Basilfang, Rattleshake, Daisyshine, and Thornspike were slain. ForestClan has four new apprentices, and Mosscurl is now a full healer. Aside from that, we declare war on WoodClan for attacking our camp. They'll regret this for the next thousand moons."

"WoodClan shall be... On high alert, then. Anyways, Almondpaw has gone missing. If anyone sees a brown tabby tom near our border, please let us know. He is very timid and anxious, and we theorize that he has run away, as he disappeared after our moonlight patrol was attacked."

"Yes, that is unfortunate. I wouldn't want to suggest he drowned, but it seems possible. DeltaClan will keep an eye out."

"Alright, it looks like everyone has spoken now." Sedgestar suddenly stood up. "I wanted to save this announcement for the very last, but it looks like it has already been discussed. MireClan had taken in a frightened and injured young tom who washed up in our swamp. He had an infected, maggot-infested wound in his

stomach, through which he had lost a lot of blood. Our junior healer Batwing was the one to treat him, and he wishes to project his final words."

The old tom nodded down at where the healers sat to the left of the bench, on a cluster of boulders. The young dark tom stood up, his tail quivering with nervousness. "Hello, all. I am Batwing, the healer who tended to Almondpaw when our new deputy Willowshade brought him into camp. I managed to bind his wounds, but when the sun started to set, I believe... he may have gotten a message from SpiritClan."

Batwing waited patiently for the shocked meows to die down. "At the last half-moon meeting, Shadowsweep shared two new prophecies that had brought her great pain. I recognized those words when Almondpaw was taking his last breaths. He... He was suddenly filled with the strength of a lion, and he looked me in the eyes and recited the prophecy. He said, 'brambles and hail shall strike down the one who chases a thousand moons.'"

Hazelstar's eyes widened in the moonlight, and she let out a hiss. "That's what Darkstar just said about us, wasn't it? That we'll regret invading them for the next thousand moons?"

"Then what are the 'brambles and hail'?" Claystar asked worriedly.

"I've had the help of my lovely daughter in decoding this prophecy, and I have come to a conclusion that the 'brambles' is referring to Twistedbramble. To prevent her from striking me down, I have... Permanently assured that she won't rebel against my leadership." Darkstar said ominously.

"As for the 'hail', me and my son have made an... arrangement." the gray tabby swiveled his head to Brightspirit's apprentice, who was almost hidden in the group of young cats. "Now, Purslanepaw!" he snarled.

Before any cat could process the command, Purslanepaw surged up, pinning Hailpaw against a tree. The dusty-colored tom slashed his claws against his victim's throat, leaving the younger cat to fall to the ground, gasping in panic as drops of coppery blood fell into

the dead grass.

Multiple cats rushed forwards, but many of them froze in place as newer, louder rumble of thunder shook their very teeth. Twistertail sprang to her feet, forcing herself to not curl up into the grass. Something terrible was happening, and she refused to cower in fear.

Batwing's quiet voice rang out in-between rolls of thunder. "That's where the other prophecy comes in! 'The brightest light shall chase the darkest dark.'" he was opening his mouth in urgency when Shadowsweep herself rushed in out of seemingly nowhere.

"Get off the metal thing!" she screeched. "It's coming! The brightest light is coming!"

Hazelstar, Sedgestar, Barleystar, Pikastar, Claystar, and Ospreystar immediately leaped off of the bench, their deputies following as they disappeared into the crowd. Darkstar fluffed out his fur, growling furiously. "I'm not afraid of any light! What could possibly-"

Right in the middle of his sentence, a bolt of lighting crackled down, striking the metal structure and sending a wave of shock through the cats of seven Clans. The thunder seemed to absorb everything for a moment, and when Twistertail's vision cleared, she stared around at the cats.

"Hey, look at me!" she giggled childishly at her legs. The fur was standing on end. Beside her, Lemmingleap grinned foolishly. "Wha- And look at you!" the black-and-white she-cat blinked at her friend. Her pelt was being pulled to its very limit.

The two she-cats laughed in shock, completely ignoring the screeching cats, who were now clawing at each other's throats as the sky crumbled open and rain began to drown the calamity on the island.

"Calm down, Brightspirit! The Moonpond isn't going to grow legs and walk away!" Sagepool scolded. Up ahead, the deputy was circling around impatiently.

"Come on, you guys! Once the sun rises, the Moonpond's powers are weaker! I need to be there before moonhigh so I have time to receive my gift!" the white tom called.

Twistertail was the first to reach him, giving her brother a flick of the tail. "That is, *if* you receive your gift. Right now, you're the most physically healthy cat in the Clan. But SpiritClan may still choose an injured leader. Like how Poppypetal was chosen even though she had retired long before Marblestar-"

"Alright, alright. I get it. You can stop complaining about your scratched-up paw and watch as I become the new leader of ForestClan." Brightspirit shrugged her off, turning around to trot up to the icy water. Sagepool and Lilyspring finally caught up, with Lilyspring still limping from an injury to her hind leg, which had been crushed in the battle at yesterday's gathering. Twistertail had fought against Wolfstride himself, earning a slash on the side of her muzzle and a deep bite mark on her foreleg. Both would likely leave scars.

The two white warriors curled up with their paws in the shallows, while Sagepool sat down beside them. Twistertail looked around for a moment before she spotted a particularly dark spot against the rocks. "Onyx-eye? Is that you?" she whispered. Sure enough, the black she-cat stood up from where she had been crouched in a dark hollow. *Does she come here every night? Is that some CliffClan thing I don't know about?*

"Wow, he really didn't last long. But shouldn't you be in there with them?" her scarred sister waved her tail at the Moonpond.

"Who, me? No, I wouldn't. But didn't Darkstar say something about Magpiepelt and Galesong..."

"Ah, yes." Onyx-eye raised her head, glancing at the hollow underneath the waterfall. "Possumstrike! Magpiepelt! Galesong!" she called, loud enough to cause Lilyspring to stir in her sleep. Sagefall silently flattened his ears at the CliffClan warrior.

The three gray cats stepped out into the light of the mostly-full moon. Twistertail darted forwards to touch whiskers with her

younger sister. All of them were now fully grown, with Galesong showing the slender tallness that ran on all three sides of the family.

"Wow, Galesong! You're so tall!" Twistertail complimented. Her brother ducked his head in acknowledgement, blinking slowly at his sister.

"Magpiepelt, why don't you tell Sagepool about all the visions you've been having? It's been ages since a CliffClan healer has gone to a half-moon meeting!" Onyx-eye suggested.

"Oh. Sure." Magpiepelt timidly stepped forwards, where the ForestClan healer had been watching, quiet as ever. "As you know, very strong and frequent visions run in my family. When I first started having them as a kit, I went to Shadowsweep for help. But then Galesong was a healer's apprentice, so I went to my mother. She said she would be taking us to a place with cats who wouldn't compare me to Shadowsweep, and I would be free to tell about my crazy visions." she explained.

"What kind of visions did you have?" Sagepool asked patiently.

"Well... When I was a kit, I was terrified of the borders, so I always stayed in camp. I had visions of cats running into our territory and killing everyone I loved. But then I became an apprentice, and had to face that fear. Then I started having visions, about Brightspirit fighting with a sister. I don't know who, but I think it's Twistertail. He was also wrestling with lightning or something. And then I started receiving weird signs about all sorts of songbirds and herbs. I'd like to talk to Shadowsweep so she can help me understand all of it. She does have a lot of experience."

"There may be a slight problem there." Sagepool seemed to squirm uncomfortably. "Shadowsweep has caught a fever, and it might be contagious. Even worse, the old girl seems to be losing it after all these moons. But have you talked to Dawnlight and the other CliffClan healers?"

"Yes, but speaking of unfortunate events relating to ForestClan healers..." Galesong seemed to be catching the conversation with a claw. "Have you received any sign about how Ravenflight died?

That's one of the deaths ForestClan has brushed over, and I want to know what happened to him. Maybe Shadowsweep has mentioned it?"

"Yes, I was very angered when his death went practically unnoticed." Sagepool nodded intensely, clearly thinking back to his mentor. "Magpiepelt, have you re-"

"You mean that old black tom that drowned in the Moonpond?" Onyx-eye butted in.

"Yes, him. That was my mentor, Ravenflight." Sagepool confirmed.

"Oh. Yeah, that was me."

"What?!" Galesong hissed. "You killed him? But why!"

"Snowspirit told me to. She was visiting her brother by the Moonpond one night, told him about her situation, and demanded that he help to kidnap her kits. I was there, as proof. Anyways, Ravenflight refused and threatened to tell the entire Clan that Snowspirit had an affair with Obsidian-eye. So I drowned him." the black cat detailed casually.

Sagepool seemed to accept it quickly. "Was it quick? Did he suffer?" he asked solemnly.

"I don't think so. It was pretty easy, actually. I only had to-"

At that moment, Lilyspring stood up, her front legs dripping wet. "I didn't get accepted." she reported simply. "Did Brightspirit- Hey, is that Galesong and Magpiepelt? And Possumpaw?" the white she-cat pricked her ears at the pale gray she-cat, who had been silently perched on a boulder.

"They're just visiting from CliffClan." Twistertail explained simply. "Speaking of which, you should probably get going before Brightspirit wakes up."

"There's just one thing." Galesong said hurriedly. "You see, Snowspirit got into a fight with Obsidian-eye a half-moon ago, and his brother Coalstone got really mad, and... He may have killed her

by accident. So we're going to join ForestClan again, since only Onyx-eye is welcome there now and Possumstrike wants to go back to MeadowClan because of how aggressive CliffClan is."

"My possible uncle 'accidentally' killed my mother?" Twistertail snorted.

"He tried to say she fell onto a rock and busted her head open, but he's always been threatening her. So... But she didn't actually like you, did she? I mean, she obviously favors Magpiepelt over anyone." Onyx-eye said matter-of-factly.

"That's a curse as well as a blessing!" Magpiepelt recalled. "She was so overprotective, and never let me do anything!"

"Even so, she should still be remembered as a loving and devoted mother." Possumstrike spoke for the first time, her hushed voice barely traveling to her siblings, who were now bowing their heads out of respect for the fallen she-cat.

The clouds were outlined in orange light when the white tom finally lifted his head from the shallows. He sprang to his paws and shook out his pelt, grinning widely at Sagepool and Lilyspring. "Well? How did it go?" the white she-cat demanded.

"It went great! I'm now Brightstar, the leader of ForestClan! Wanna guess what my gift is?" he said proudly.

Twistertail rolled her eyes at the white tom. "Leaders aren't supposed to tell their gifts, right?"

Sagepool studied the new leader for a moment, thinking. "Brightstar can choose what to do with that information. In fact, he makes the rules now."

Brightstar grinned even wider, if that was possible. "Well then, my gift is I can see everything like it's as bright as day, no matter the weather." he announced. "And also, I'm making Squirrelstrike the deputy, since she's my mate and all... Wait. Who are *the*y?" he suddenly pointed his tail accusingly at his younger siblings.

"Well, it looks like you ForestClan cats have a lot of catching-up to

do." Onyx-eye commented.

"What exactly did you want to talk about?" Twistertail prodded, eyeing her lazy brother. He had been the ForestClan leader for two moons now, making the worst descisions possible. His den was littered with a lifetime's worth of bones, and the black-and-white she-cat winced as she sat on one of them.

"I just wanted to thank you, sister." the white tom purred. "You and Squirrelstrike have done wonders around here. It's the dead of leaf-bare, yet we have plenty to eat. And our seemingly-endless conflict over WoodClan and MireClan territory has been resolved. I liked your idea of giving them the land if they give us some of their herbs."

"It was Mosscurl's idea, actually." Twistertail reminded him. "Anyways, what were you going to say?"

"How are Rosepaw and Purslanepaw doing? I heard that Berrypaw tripped over something and hurt himself. Is that true?"

"I don't know. But why don't you ask Galesong? He's been doing most of the healing around here."

"I don't care for those *healers*. I've got all my information right at my claw-tips, with my favorite warriors! Like you and Squirrelstrike and Lilyspring and Ratchaser... You know why he named his kits insanely early? He doesn't follow the Valley Cat Code. How strange, right?"

Twistertail glanced behind her at the tree roots. The sun was setting, and since Squirrelstrike spent all her time in the nursery, she should probably get to organizing the dusk patrols, preferably with Finchflame, her charismatic interest. "Brightstar, what is it you wanted to talk to me about? I kind of have places to be."

Her brother thought for a moment, narrowing his eyes luxuriously. "So, you know how you were telling our father about all those names, and how Shadowsweep said it would be a youngster, so we narrowed down the list? Can you repeat those?"

Twistertail let out an annoyed hiss. "I don't have time to sit here and-"

"Okay, okay. Just tell me the most important ones, by Clan."

"Duskpaw and Sparkpaw, and Ivorystar's apprentice Hollypaw from RockClan are the closest we can get to the 'brambles and hail' that will 'strike down the one who chases a thousand moons.'" she said half-heartedly.

The leader narrowed his eyes further. "We already said that Darkstar was the subject, since he wanted WoodClan to regret their attack for a thousand moons. That's why I was in on his plan to claw out one of Twistedbramble's eyes, and kill Hailpaw. But hasn't Magpiepelt been receiving signs about that same prophecy?"

"I think you might be the one who chases a thousand moons, Brightstar."

"Pardon?"

"Remember when you said that you would live for a thousand moons and be the greatest leader of all time?" Twistertail reminded him.

"But that was ages ago! And I'm not the only one who's part of a prophecy. You know, 'many will wield the light as they search the shadows, but there will be one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star'. I'm the 'brightest star' in the prophecy, and you're the one who joins the darkness. That's the reason I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh? How so?"

"Promise me you won't join the darkness to hunt the brightest star." Brightstar practically begged.

Twistertail fought to keep an even expression. "As long as you don't give me a reason. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a Clan to lead."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Today we honor our healer Shadowsweep, who served the Clan for many moons and brought us many messages from SpiritClan." Galesong said solemnly. Beside him, Magpiepelt twined her tail with his. Her brother had been reclusive ever since his mentor had died that morning, only now leaving his den at moonrise to say a final goodbye.

"I'll sit vigil with you, and we'll bury her in the morning." Nightfeather promised, curling up beside the other healers. A few cats wandered off, mostly the younger ones who didn't know the fallen she-cat as well as the warriors did. Twistertail was glancing around the camp as she sat down, but did a double take when she saw Brightstar heading towards the nursery.

"Brother!" she hissed, swiftly darting in front of him. "You can't just walk away like that! Aren't you going to sit vigil with Galesong and Magpiepelt and-"

"I would, but Duskkit had caught a case of frostcough, remember? I need to make sure he's alright." Brightstar shrugged her off, ducking into the den. Twistertail snorted in annoyance, following the white tom into the darkness to make sure his quest wasn't too outrageous.

Inside, Pumpkinpelt and Sparrowspots were curled up, fast asleep. Cardinalheart was talking with Ratchaser, who was sitting beside his mate and three young kits. At the very back, Squirrelstrike was grooming her two kits. The queen narrowed her eyes at her mate as he stepped forwards, not responding to his purr. "Brightstar, isn't the leader or deputy supposed to sit vigil when a cat dies? Especially a healer? And isn't it your brother's mentor?" she reminded him sternly.

"Yes, yes. How is Duskkit?" the white tom prodded, waving off his mate's scolding.

"He's been sleeping quietly all day." Squirrelstrike rolled her eyes at Brightstar's excessive concern. "He's over that case of frostcough, you know."

Before Twistertail could say anything to her brother, he was circling around to poke his head into the camp. "Sagepool! You're needed!" he called.

"Sagepool is mourning! And you should be, too!" Twistertail growled. "Squirrelstrike, he listens to you. Tell him how crazy he's being!"

"Your sister does have a point. Why don't you-" the deputy was cut off by the junior healer's appearance.

"Brightstar, it is tradition for healers to watch over our fallen warriors, especially if they were a loved one." Sagepool said, with an edge of pain in his voice. "What is so important that I must see?"

"Duskkit has been sleeping all day. But that could be a sign that his frostcough is worse!" Brightstar thrust a paw in the general direction of his mate.

"He's probably just tired from being sick." Squirrelstrike reasoned.

"Fine, I'll take a look at him." Sagepool reluctantly stepped over to the new queen while her mate watched intensely. Twistertail sighed, turning around to greet her old friend.

"Hello, Pumpkinpelt. How are you?" she asked tiredly.

"You look exhausted, Twistertail. And Sparrowspots has been treating me like royalty! Seriously, he's brought me prey four times today!" the fluffy she-cat nudged her mate vigorously.

The spotted tom ducked his head, seemingly embarrassed.. "What, did you expect me to leave you to starve in here?" he purred. "I've barely left the camp ever since Pumpkinpelt became a queen. I haven't been on a patrol recently... I was thinking of becoming a

queen myself."

"That would be fitting." Twistertail encouraged. "You seem to be great around kits."

"Speaking of which, are you and Finchflame, like, together now?" Pumpkinpelt asked mischievously.

Twistertail shrugged, thinking. "I don't know. We've been seeing each other for only, like, a moon or so. Actually, I haven't seen him since the day before yesterday."

Pumpkinpelt giggled furiously. "Well then, what are you waiting for? Go get him!"

Twistertail hung her head in shame, feeling all cats in the nursery staring at her as she scooted towards the exit, off to search for the cream-and-ginger tom.

"Wait. I just thought of something." Twistertail suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"What is it?" Finchflame asked intently, catching up to the she-cat.

"Why was Almondpaw on a moonlight patrol if he was on his fourth day of training?"

Lilyspring padded over from where she had been walking in the shallows of the lake. "Maybe their moonhigh patrols aren't as dangerous as they are in ForestClan? I mean, the territories are really different if you keep walking. The WoodClan forest has tall trees that are really spread out. You can see so much better without all the foliage we have to deal with!" she suggested.

"But any forest at night is still creepy." Finchflame said matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean, creepy? It's beautiful! Don't you appreciate the beauty of the moonlight?" Twistertail looked around at the ghostly dunes and the shimmering water that reflected the light of the moon, which was bound to be full in a few days.

"No, it's still creepy. There's so many bugs and nocturnal creatures running around in the darkness." Finchflame wrinkled his nose. "But yes, it is beautiful. When you're in it, that is."

"Oh, stop. That got redundant after the five hundredth time." Twistertail gave him a shove.

"Look! Is that Brightstar?" Lilyspring suddenly pricked her whiskers up ahead. In the distance, a large, fluffy white cat was standing in the shallows, looking at them intently.

"What if he's trying to go to the MireClan border and start another conflict?" Finchflame fretted. "It's kind of sad that we actually have to worry about that."

Twistertail squinted, trying to make out the cat's features. "I'll go ahead and talk to them. If it's Brightstar, he might listen to me." she said, moments before trotting ahead. Away from her friends, the true temperature of the mid-leafbare night began to set in, and she shivered uncontrollably. Her paws were starting to go numb when she was within three moose-lengths, still staring at her uncomfortably sandy legs. When she entered the chilly water, she didn't have to look up to notice something- the cat was glowing.

"Wha-" Twistertail took a few steps back, stunned. It wasn't Brightstar, alright. Snowspirit's starry blue eyes stared back at her coldly. "Mother?" the warrior almost squeaked.

"I'm just here to tell you something that you may or may not know." the fluffy she-cat snarled, her echoing voice lined with ice.

"Is- Isn't this supposed to be, like, some important moment where I'm being visited by my dead mother? Is it a prophecy?" Twistertail breathed.

"No. I just wanted to let you know that you'll never be a leader. Sure, you'd make a good deputy. A great one, I'll give you that. But if ever you go to the Moonpond with the intention of receiving some kind of gift... Well, that isn't going to happen." her mother said simply.

"You mean... I'm going to die soon?"

"Oh, no. Magpiepelt has told me you will live for a long time and mentor a few fine warriors and raise healthy and happy kits. Good for you. But that was when she was four moons old. Then, she started telling me of you and Brightstar causing mass destruction. So I stopped investing all my time and effort into making you like me."

"Um, okay, so I *do* have kits. But where is this going?"

"I just wanted to tell you that you'll never be a leader. You're needed more as a warrior. But I want you to know that ever since you were a tiny kit, you were destined to be the downfall of your brother. That's all. I just was visiting and I noticed you're still loyal to that overgrown fur ball." her mother growled unceremoniously.

"In other words, I'm the one prophecized to save everyone from my evil brother?" Twistertail narrowed her eyes. Hadn't Shadowsweep said that once?

"Just know that your fate isn't *that* glorious, but you'll always have a special place in my heart." Snowspirit blinked thoroughly as if to clear her face of any emotion, then tilted her head oddly. "Okay, I'll unfreeze time now." she began to pad away, leaving no trace of her paws in the sand.

Just as the hairs on the warrior's neck began to relax, her mother glanced over her shoulder. "And if you're wondering, yes. Finchflame is perfect for you."

Twistertail circled around, trying to adjust to the darkness of the now-empty night. Lilyspring was rising over a dune, looking around for the starry cat. "Hey, where'd they go?" she called.

"Oh, that was... Some reflection on the water." Twistertail lied, shaking out her pelt as she set her paws on dry land. Moments later, Finchflame bounded over the sand, grinning at her.

"Hey, I just had the greatest idea!" he announced excitedly.

"Oh, really? What's that?" Twistertail pricked her ears at him.

"So, you know how we fish here all the time? Maybe we should go out to the smaller island together and hunt there. DeltaClan cats do that around dawn and dusk, but sometimes at night when the moon is basically full." he suggested.

"That's a great idea!" Lilyspring agreed. "We're practically on the MireClan border, so all we have to do is go back to camp. It wouldn't hurt to fish a little, wouldn't it?"

"I've done it with the DeltaClan warrior Gillflip a few times before. Have you been in the middle of the lake before?" she asked the pale she-cat.

Lilyspring rolled her eyes. "Have I? Have you forgotten that I've caught every type of prey in the valley?" she snorted.

Finchflame narrowed his eyes mischievously. "And they said all the pretty girls can't hunt." he joked.

Twistertail shot him a glare, lashing her tail. "Okay, now I know you're just trying to annoy me."

She charged into the water, the other two cats of the moonlight patrol following her closely. Lilyspring was an excellent swimmer, speeding ahead in front of the younger warriors. Finchflame was lingering behind, paddling without aim. After a few moments of speculation, Twistertail circled back to grab his scruff and drag him the rest of the way to the smaller island.

"What is this, an invasion?" a slightly familiar voice yowled.

"Stay back, Algaepaw. Those are some ForestClan friends." an even more familiar voice sounded.

Lilyspring leaped out of the water and said something in greeting, but Twistertail was too occupied in trying to drag Finchflame up with her. Finally she gave up, jumping onto the prickly ledge and lending him a paw.

"Hello again, Twistertail. And Finchflame, too." Gillflip purred. Beside him, a dark grayish-brown cat was suspiciously sniffing at Lilyspring.

"Sorry about Algaepaw. They haven't seen cats from another Clan before, except when Twistertail brought them and Leechpaw back to camp when they were washed away." the pale gray warrior explained.

"Oh, that was you?" Finchflame gave her an odd look. "Did they, like, give you some kind of reward for it?"

"That's rude. She wasn't expecting any reward, obviously." Lilyspring snapped.

"Well, they did offer me stuff. But they agreed that if we ever needed a favor I could go to them." Twistertail offered. "So I guess it's an agreement between two Clans."

"Why don't we celebrate this agreement with some moonlight fishing?" Gillflip suggested.

"What did you think we came here for?" Twistertail said brightly.

"I literally just got back from a night of fishing. How can you expect me to lead the dawn patrol?!" Twistertail growled.

Brightstar pushed aside the remains of the paw-ful of minnows his sister had provided, scattering the bones beside his nest. "Well, Squirrelstrike can't do it. But I guess if my most loyal subject doesn't want to, I'll ask Crowpelt or Ratchaser. Speaking of which, we've been training in the Frozen Forest." he said casually.

"What? You can't just go back on your word like that!" the black-and-white warrior lashed her tail furiously.

"Darkstar made it so that we can train there if we want. It seems fair, too." Brightstar shrugged. "Anyways, I'll go ask Robinsong or someone to organize the patrol." he stood up to leave the den. Twistertail followed, watching his every move.

"Make sure Rosepaw is on the hunting patrol, please. And Parsleyshade tore off a claw while hunting yesterday, so it would be a good idea for Berrypaw to go. And Squirrelstrike might want to patrol a border, and if you're going, be sure to bring Purslanepaw with you. His punishment for the killing has been served already,

but you haven't been training him for two days." she informed him.

"Huh, I thought you said you were going to bed. Why don't you organize the patrol?" the white tom snickered. "They're already waiting for you by the hollow log."

Twistertail cast her gaze to the far side of the camp, where several cats had congregated in the early light. "Alright, fine. I'll organize it." she sighed, breaking away from her brother. The Clan was just waking up, with Squirrelstrike's two kits peeking over the edge of the den. They were soon leaping into the dirt, their mother not far behind. "Squirrelstrike!" Twistertail called. "Why don't you go on the dawn patrol?"

The queen glanced back to where the one-eyed Twistedbramble was emerging, her whiskers drooping with sleep. "Don't worry, dear." the older cat assured. "I'll keep an eye on your kits, as if they need watching!"

Duskkit and Sparkkit were play-fighting in the same place Twistertail used to scramble around with her littermates. It had been a year now since she had snuck out of camp and caught that robin. Ah, yes, those were the days...

"Um, Twistertail? Are you organizing the patrols?" Squirrelstrike startled her out of her nostalgia.

"I mean, you could. If you want to." she fumbled for words, glancing back at the cats joining her waiting audience.

Squirrelstrike looked sorrowful for a moment, gazing down at her paws. "I think maybe I shouldn't be the deputy. I didn't ask for it, and I'm not as eager to fight as I used to be, especially now that I have kits. And the thought of being Squirrelstar one day... It scares me. Would you mind taking my place?" she smiled hopefully.

Twistertail narrowed her eyes, thinking. "Actually, I've received... Signs from SpiritClan that I will never be a leader. But I've been doing deputy tasks for a while now." she shifted her paws, trying to think of something to say, but then an idea fluttered into her head. "How about until Duskkit becomes apprenticed to Mosscurl tonight,

I'll be the deputy. And then we can choose a better cat. Sound good?"

Squirrelstrike's eyes widened. "Really? Duskkit is going to be apprenticed to Mosscurl? But she's so young!"

"That's just what Brightstar said." Twistertail offered.

"That's it. I'm talking to him." Squirrelstrike marched off towards the white tom, who was luxuriously stretched out on the revered leader's branch.

Twistertail turned to the waiting cats, some of which were glancing up at the now-dark-blue sky. "Alright, patrols. Ratchaser and Mousefall with Thrushpaw and Berrypaw, you go to the lake border. Sparrowspots, Ambereyes, and Viperstrike will go to the twoleg border. Snakelash, Lilyspring, and Rosepaw will go hunting." she ordered.

The rosy apprentice stepped forwards, looking up hopefully. "Are you going with us?" she asked.

"No, but I'm sorry being the mother of the Clan is taking to much time and effort and..." Twistertail yawned uncontrollably. "How about we go to Duskkit's ceremony tonight? Be sure to get plenty of sleep before then, though. Speaking of which, wake me a little after sun-high."

Rosepaw perked her ears happily. "Okay! Sounds like a plan!"

"Duskpaw, you understand that by being a healers' apprentice you take on a complicated set of privileges and responsibilities?" Sagepool asked solemnly.

"I do." Duskpaw said humbly.

"Now you may touch whiskers with your new mentor, Mosscurl." the senior healer commanded.

Brightstar and Squirrelstrike let out yowls of joy as Duskpaw and Mosscurl sealed their fates. Rosepaw contributed an eager meow, while Twistertail just glanced up nervously at the almost-circle of

moon, which valiantly shone through layers of clouds. Duskpaw's first starry dream had been successful, allowing him to take on the role of a healer's apprentice. But it was considered disrespectful to yowl around the Moonpond- the reason why Sagepool was also staring up at the sky.

"Quiet, all of you!" he snarled. "Do you *want* the spirits to send a bolt of lightning to silence us?"

As he spoke, a new wind stirred the surface of the glassy water. Rosepaw's eyes widened, and she glanced around anxiously. "You mean, how they killed Darkstar? And they can send, like, a really strong wind to kill us? Or they could make the mountains fall on us?" she fretted.

"Of course not. They only do that to evil cats." Twistertail assured. But just as she was putting a paw on her apprentice's shoulder, an ominous roll of thunder echoed around the rocks, which were already howling with wind.

"Is this a sign from SpiritClan?" Mosscurl asked, desperately turning to the more experienced healer.

"No, this is just some bad weather. But since ForestClan is so far away, we should probably stay here for the night. Otherwise, it might start raining while we're traveling, and we would have to shelter in a nearby camp. And I don't think they'd let us in, what with our leader, deputy, and a warrior." Sagepool reasoned.

"And me! I'm here!" Rosepaw protested.

"Eugh!" Brightstar suddenly sprang to his paws. "I just felt a raindrop!" he snarled, shaking out his thick fur.

"Aww, is the big scary ForestClan leader afraid of a little rain?" Squirrelstrike teased.

"Wha- No, I just don't like water." he snapped. Sure enough, more raindrops began to fall around the ForestClan patrol.

"We should probably seek shelter." Sagepool suggested, rising to his paws.

"How about that cave? There was a storm the first time I went to the Moonpond, and we sheltered there." Mosscurl pointed her tail at the shadow underneath a boulder.

"Yes, that's a good idea." Sagepool followed her closely as the rain began to pour. Just as he was lingering on the edge of rain and shelter, he turned around and yowled something. "Brightstar, are you coming?"

The white tom was on the far side of the water, two of his paws placed on a boulder. "It's leader-to-SpiritClan business. Don't wait on me." his voice was barely audible over the thunder. In a heartbeat, the ForestClan leader disappeared into the stormy night.

"He's heading towards RockClan territory! I need to go fetch him!" Twistertail hissed, turning her paws west. Her apprentice immediately sprang to her side.

"Why don't I go with you?" she suggested enthusiastically.

"Rosepaw, this isn't a hunting patrol. He's heading towards unfamiliar Clan territory, and you haven't been training in combat for that long. How about you stay here and keep Duskpaw company?" the black-and-white she-cat ordered gently.

"Okay. I'll see you..." the young cat turned back to the shadows, where Squirrelstrike and the three healers were waiting. Twistertail exchanged a glance with the ginger warrior before turning away and leaping into the dark mist.

"Hello? Brightstar? Anyone?" she yowled through the rain. Only a cry of thunder answered her call. She leaped to the top of another dune-like boulder, desperately trying to make sense of the landscape. It was smooth, and a lot less complicated than the CliffClan territory, but the storm made it impossible to see more than a few otter-lengths.

"Brother!" she yowled louder, now hearing an echo. By some miracle, she picked up a voice that just had to belong to the ForestClan leader. She sprang off her perch, fighting through the terrain to her right. Finally, she followed a dip down into a rocky

hollow, where she could make out her brother's white pelt against the ocean of gray.

"Brightstar! Why did you run off like that? And what are you-" the she-cat was silenced when the tom turned around. Blood was splattered on his muzzle, and at his paws lay a twitching tortoiseshell cat. It was Hollypaw, the apprentice of the RockClan leader Ivorystar. Twistertail was fighting to either back up or step forwards.

"Oh, you found me already. I was going to ask you to help me, but I know how you don't like killing cats." Brightstar said casually, tilting his muzzle to the night sky to let the rain wash away the red stains of his crime. "You said Hollypaw was one of the three cats who was prophecized to be the end of my reign. But I guess you aren't going to help me with the other two?"

Before she could even say anything, Twistertail ran as fast as she could. She wasn't running away from her brother, but rather to warn Squirrelstrike of the new danger. Brightstar was big and strong, but he was slow. Twistertail, however, streaked across the slick rocks with ease. Her long, skinny legs were surely a curse sometimes, but they could also be a blessing.

"Duskpaw!" she yowled frantically as she landed beside the Moonpond. "Duskpaw, you need to get out of here!"

The she-cat skidded to a halt in front of the small cave where the patrol had been sheltering from the storm. The shadows were empty. She whirled around, letting out a hiss of panic. But out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a familiar cat slinking out from under the waterfall, barely visible against the dark scenery.

"Onyx-eye!" Twistertail yowled. "Brightstar-"

The black cat cut her off with a flick of her tail. "We know. Magpiepelt received visions of this. And the healers are safe, by the way. We have a plan to stop Brightstar." she said quickly.

"Wha- Where are they? And how-"

Onyx-eye once again waved her tail for silence. "Follow me." she commanded, turning around and melting into the shadows once more.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Quartzstar narrowed his eyes at Twistertail and Onyx-eye, flattening his ears in disbelief. "You want me to send my most valued warriors to fight the crazy ForestClan leader?" he said oddly. "Just because there's a chance he hasn't caught that small apprentice yet? It doesn't make sense. Are you sure you've interpreted this properly?"

"Of course! The prophecy said that 'many will wield the light', which is obviously Lightshine and Glowheart! And it never said anything about them failing." Magpiepelt said passionately.

"Alright, then. I'll go get them." Quartzstar slowly stood up and padded out of his den. Magpiepelt turned back to her two sisters, her expression unreadable. L

"So, how did it go?" she asked. "Did you point them in the right direction?"

"I didn't know he was going to run off and apparently kill the RockClan leader's apprentice..." Onyx-eye recounted. "I did tell the three healers and Squirrelstrike to travel upstream, but Brightstar has probably picked up their scent. Was there anything else you've figured out?" the black cat pricked her ears at the healer.

"I don't know. I have no idea what the prophecy means by 'joins the darkness' or 'search the shadows.'" the healer admitted, glaring down at her paws.

"I think I know why Brightstar ran off and killed that apprentice." Twistertail spoke up. "There were three cats prophecized to be the end of him, and Hollypaw was one of them, with Duskpaw and Sparkpaw being the other two. I just feel terrible for giving him that information..."

"But why would Duskpaw and Sparkpaw be the end of him if they

survive? And why Hollypaw, too?" Onyx-eye wondered.

"That's not a problem right now." Twistertail straightened up. She could hear paw-steps outside. Not a moment later, Lightshine and Glowheart entered the den.

"Hey, guys! What do you need us for?" Lightshine said enthusiastically.

"You two have been prophesied to fight Brightstar." Magpiepelt said simply.

"This isn't a normal request..." Lightshine noted, narrowing his eyes. "Usually when cats from other Clans ask me and my sister to do something, it's, like, a raccoon invasion or a fallen log they need moving."

"Why are we fighting the ForestClan leader?" Glowheart looked confused.

"Basically, four cats were told to have the power to kill Brightstar- Hailpaw of MireClan, Hollypaw of RockClan, and his kits Duskpaw and Sparkpaw of ForestClan. So, Brightstar got insecure about it and worked with Darkstar to kill Hailpaw at a gathering. And after his son got his first healer's dream at the Moonpond, he ran off to RockClan and killed Hollypaw. Now he's chasing after the three ForestClan healers and his mate, Squirrelstrike. Brightstar needs to be stopped before he hurts them." Onyx-eye explained quickly.

"Wait! What if he killed Sparkpaw before we left?" Twistertail said suddenly.

"All we should be focused on is fulfilling the prophecy." Onyx-eye growled certainly. She sprang to her paws, waving her tail at the two CliffClan warriors. "Alright, let's go."

The sun gallantly fought through the thick clouds and the persistent rain, casting warm and welcome rays into the otherwise-cold morning. Twistertail could see the horizon far away from where she

stood on top of the mountain, taking in the view as she caught her breath.

"It's cool, isn't it?" Onyx-eye commented. "But it's even better if you turn around."

"Oh, really?" Twistertail circled backwards to face the other direction. The fiery sun was almost blinding as it illuminated the entire valley. "Woah, look at that! I can see the farm from up here! And the DeltaClan islands look so small!" she marveled.

"I hate to interrupt your view, but we should probably keep going." Lightshine encouraged gently. He quickly trotted ahead downhill, his sister Glowheart following a few moments later. Twistertail wistfully watched them go, then shook the dew from her pelt and reluctantly continued the journey.

"Ugh, my paws hurt so much! When are we going to stop and hunt?" she complained tiredly.

"Stop being such a slimy leech, Twistertail! We ate back at CliffClan!" Onyx-eye scolded.

"But that was ages ago!" the black-and-white she-cat grumbled. "Is this another CliffClan thing? Having lots of stamina? Or am I just really tired from traveling all the way from ForestClan?"

"In case you haven't caught on, CliffClan apprentices train much harder than in other Clans." Onyx-eye reminded her. "Of course we have a lot more stamina. StoneClan territories are a lot harder to patrol, and-" at that moment, she slipped and fell in the sharp pebbles.

"You okay?" Twistertail narrowed her eyes at her otherwise-graceful sister.

"And did I mention we have a much higher pain tolerance?" the black cat sprang to her paws, taking off again with another burst of energy. "I mean, we have to, considering how much training and patrolling we do. Did I mention that Smokesight might become a healer? I mean, he's compassionate and all, but seriously, the guy's

got the memory of a snowflake!" she rambled.

"Come here! We found them!" Lightshine yowled from downhill. Onyx-eye immediately raced ahead, while Twistertail forced her aching paws to walk faster. By the time she reached the scraggly bushes where the CliffClan cats were, she was panting profusely. Squirrelstrike and Sagepool were deep in conversation with the warriors, while Mosscurl was crouched in the dry foliage with Duskpaw cowering by her side.

"Sorry for attacking you, Lightshine." Squirrelstrike was saying. "I though you were Brightstar. You do look a lot like him, though."

"That makes sense." the white tom chuckled. "Me and Glowheart are related to his father, actually. The CliffClan one, that is."

"Yes, yes. That's grand. Now could we please focus on our potentially lethal situation?" Sagepool snapped, glancing around nervously. "Have you found him yet?"

"We were following your trail, but now that we've located you our only goal is to confront him." Glowheart assured, but her eyes revealed her true nervousness. She turned back to Onyx-eye, lashing her tail uncertainly. "That is what we're doing, right? Talking to him?"

"I thought we were fighting him." Lightshine offered.

"The prophecy... It only..." Twistertail finally panted, but she gave up and glared at her sister, who finished for her.

"The prophecy only said we would 'wield the light'. It didn't say anything about what the light would do." Onyx-eye said dutifully.

"You mean we could die?" Glowheart's eyes were wide, glittering in the early light. "I have kits! I can't just risk my life like that!"

"I wouldn't say that. Obviously we're the good guys in the story! And the good guys don't die, right? Only if we're side characters in some bigger story, helping the real hero on their way. But we know we're the ones heeding the call of a quest, obviously." Lightshine said brightly, nudging his sister affectionately. "This is just another

one of the wonderful adventures of Glowheart and Lightshine."

"Okay, but what about the rest of the prophecy?" Glowheart worried.

"...But there will be one who joins the darkness to hunt the brightest star." Twistertail reported.

Onyx-eye held up a paw. "Wait. That part already happened." she declared. "You and I kind of worked together to get Lightshine and Glowheart to help us, and we've been hunting Brightstar ever since a bit before dawn."

"Then, what happens now?" Glowheart turned to the four other ForestClan cats. "Squirrelstrike, can you help us look for Brightstar? I'm not a healer, but I'm pretty sure they can't fight if not in self defense."

"Of course I will!" Squirrelstrike said boldly. "It's been a while since I've used my claws, but of course I remember Robinsong's training!"

Suddenly, a sickening realization hit Twistertail as if she had been slapped in the face with a beaver's tail. "Rosepaw!" she yowled. "Where's Rosepaw?!"

Mosscurl stood up and circled around to check behind the other healers who were sheltering in the bushes, but when she was facing the young warrior again, her eyes gave away the report. "I could have sworn she came with us!" she whispered frantically.

"Looking for this?" a voice suddenly rang out across the rocky field. Twistertail whirled around to see Brightstar, who had somehow crept up on them. Even worse, in his jaws was Rosepaw, dangling limply with a deep wound on her shoulder. The white tom dropped the small apprentice as if she were a bundle off moss. Rosepaw slightly tumbled downhill, exactly like an actual bundle of moss.

"Rosepaw!" Twistertail screeched, rushing forwards. The young cat was alive, but had lost a bit of blood and looked thoroughly stunned.

"Don't worry, I didn't hurt her too much. But that'll change if you

don't help me with my little... task." Brightstar glanced around at the cats.

"Rosepaw, what happened to you?" Twistertail stared down at the tabby.

"Onyx-eye told us that Brightstar was going to hurt us, so of course I went looking for him!" Rosepaw hissed faintly. "He's actually a lot scarier up closer. You aren't going to join him, are you?"

At that moment, the white tom jumped down from his perch, luxuriously striding towards Twistertail and Rosepaw. Onyx-eye immediately flooded to her side, growling ferociously. "Magpiepelt has been recieving visions of this for moons, if not her entire life! And in all of the prophecies, you get struck down!" she snarled. "And we're prepared, by the way. If you want to hurt the healers, you'll have to get through us first."

As she spoke, Lightshine and Glowheart took their places beside the two sisters. Mosscurl quickly darted forwards to grab Rosepaw by the scruff, where she gently dragged her over to the three healers, leaving a trail of blood. Twistertail fought to turn her eyes back to her brother, but once she looked at his smug face, she knew this was when the darkness would defeat the light.

"If I had known you were going to the dark side, sister, I would have brought some extra warriors!" Brightstar purred sinisterly. "Too bad I only brought five!" At his implied command, Purslanepaw appeared over the rocks, followed by Crowpelt, Ratchaser, Snakelash, and Viperstrike.

"Purslanepaw!" Twistertail spat. "Turn back! This isn't a fight you should be-"

"What, you think I'm not trained for battle? I've had all these cats preparing me for this battle, ever since I was a young kit!" Purslanepaw said triumphantly, his tail vibrating with excitement.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the leader snapped. "Come and attack us so we can rip your throats out properly! Or would you rather we come to you and make it slightly less embarrassing?"

"Surely he wouldn't hurt these innocent cats!" Lightshine hissed in disbelief. "Who would do such a thing?"

"It was prophesied that many would wield the light to defeat me, and there would be one that would join the darkness to hunt me! All of this is true, but I have yet to exterminate the last two cats predicted to be my downfall... And right now all of you are standing in my way!" Brightstar crowed, but then his voice grew terrifyingly gentle. "You've done your part in bringing the 'light' to me, Onyx-eye. Now, you can drop the act."

Twistertail turned to the black she-cat, her ears flattening in realization. "Sister... You're working with him?"

Onyx-eye actually looked regretful. "I'm sorry, I... I thought you'd join him... Or, us. I never meant for Rosepaw to get hurt, and I didn't know Brightstar was after his own kits. All he told me was that he was going after some cats who were planning against him. I didn't know they were healers... and young cats." she explained.

"So you're going to fight him now, aren't you?" Twistertail asked desperately.

"Sorry, but... This is a prophecy. It's set in the stars." the black cat said as she turned away. She took her place among the older warriors, squeezing between Crowpelt and Ratchaser. Brightstar gave a small smile of approval, then turned back to his prey. He eyed the three bristling warriors for a tense moment, then let out a wild yowl of rage. He sprang off the rocks and shot downhill, closely followed by his six evil companions.

The three white cats tumbled back, caught in a fight all of their own, one that had been foretold for moons, if not a year. Squirrelstrike took on her father and two sisters, while Twistertail knew exactly who she was going to dig her claws into. She entrapped Crowpelt's neck in her paws, utilizing her hind paws when they hit the ground. In an instant, she had the older dark gray cat pinned.

"If you had joined us, you wouldn't have to fight the cat who taught you everything!" he spat.

"Everything? You starved me of basic information, then dumped me in the Frozen Forest to fight for my life!" she retorted, bringing up a paw to slash her claws across his muzzle.

"Don't you know to not bite the paw that feeds you?" Crowpelt growled, pushing one of her hind legs with one of his bizarrely cold paws. Twistertail sprang away before he could make a quick move, circling around and staring at him intensely. But when she crouched down, she felt icy fangs on her back.

She whirled around to see Onyx-eye attempting to snap her spine. She immediately leaped to her feet, shaking her pelt vigorously. The black cat backed up a bit, then surged forwards again to seize her sister's shoulder with her viciously long teeth. Twistertail spun around, hooking an unused front paw with her tail and flinging the black cat to the ground. Crowpelt, who had pounced at the younger warrior, skidded directly into the wildly screeching jaws of Onyx-eye.

The two rolled around on the rocks, striking furiously at whichever pelt. Twistertail hung back for an uncertain moment. Crowpelt's freakishly long claws were firmly stuck in the thicker fur, while Onyx-eye had her teeth firmly locked around one of his ears. She gave a tug, and half of it ripped right of with a horrifying snap. "Rosepaw!" she snarled. "Get her!"

For a moment, it seemed as if the black cat were instructing the injured apprentice to target her mentor, but then it clicked. Onyx-eye really was biting the heart and soul out of the senior warrior, and warning her about her apprentice's potential predicament. Twistertail whirled around to witness the speckled ginger she-cat, Snakelash, bring up her paw to strike the much smaller cat who was cowering in the frozen foliage.

The black-and-white warrior charged at the older she-cat, firmly biting her front leg and twisting upwards, swinging the more experienced warrior off her feet and into her unsheathed claws- a move Onyx-eye had taught her herself, and the one she had just attempted twice. But Snakelash obviously had learned this attack in the Frozen Forest as well, ducking down to bite at Twistertail's exposed underside.

She leaped off of the vicious she-cat, who attempted to stand up but stumbled onto her profusely-bleeding front leg, which had been crushed between Twistertail's teeth moments before. The younger warrior glanced around at the scraggly bushes before seizing Rosepaw in her jaws. Just as she sprang towards the open rocks, Squirrelstrike darted past her and landed a heavy blow on Snakelash's nose, driving the speckled warrior away. The fierce she-cat quickly whirled around, glaring at Twistertail. "Give her to me!" she snarled. "Go after Brightstar, he and Onyx-eye are running to get reinforcements from CliffClan! I'll take care of Ratchaser and Viperstrike."

Twistertail quickly set down the small cat in a less-prickly part of the bushes before rushing out of the cluster of foliage. Outside, Lightshine and Glowheart had clearly been defeated, while Viperstrike and Ratchaser were racing away, following the tracks made by the healers. Two sets of paw prints, however, went the opposite direction. One was unusually deep, while the other was made by a pitifully underweight cat.

Thunder rolled across the sky, bringing a new wave of rain and the ominous pecking of hail. Pebbles of ice rained down around the warrior, who was now fighting uphill through the unfavorable weather. Just as she reached the top of the ridge, paw-sized hail was crashing down around her. But more importantly, she could see Brightstar and Onyx-eye. Despite Squirelstrike's account, they clearly weren't working together.

Onyx-eye had the white tom by the neck, but the much larger and heavier cat easily flung her aside, even though her weirdly long teeth had left a wound that made him stagger back. Blood ran down his chest and into the puddles under his paws as he roared in pain and frustration. His fierce opponent, however, was in much worse condition. She flopped over, showing a few gnarly wounds from Crowpelt- but Brightstar had obviously broken something.

"Sister!" Twistertial yowled, galloping to the scrawny cat's side.

"Look... Watch as... Wait..." Onyx-eye managed theatrically, not taking her eyes off of the white tom, who was now slowly walking towards them. Twistertail whirled around, growling furiously.

Brightstar was also muffled by lack of sleep and the recent exertion, so much so that he didn't even notice the web of of vines tangled around his front paws as he stumbled closer.

"Come on, now. Don't feel bad about the demise of our enemies." Brightstar said oddly.

"You're killing kits!" Twistertail hissed.

"This was all part of the prophecy, remember?" he growled. "And all prophecies come true." The white tom took another step, but the tangled foliage on his paws had stuck together. He crashed to the ground, stunned for a moment. Not a heartbeat later, something white streaked down and cracked apart on his head. Immediately, he stopped moving, letting out his last breath.

"Ah, I knew it." Onyx-eye reported, deliriously cheerful. "'Brambles and hail will strike down the one who chases a thousand moons! I called it! So called it..."

Twistertail edged closer, but no matter how many times she blinked, it wasn't her sleep-deprived mind playing tricks on her. A piece of hail had struck her brother in the head, killing him instantly. Brambles and hail had, truly, struck down the one who chased a thousand moons.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Rosepaw!" Twistertail yowled, racing down the mountain. "Where is she? Is she alright?" She squinted to see through the rain, barely making out the cat's pelts. Squirrelstrike was watching intensely as Sagepool and Mosscurl took the opportunity to demonstrate proper wound-care to Duskpaw. The two most injured cats, Lightshine and Rosepaw, were the ones being treated. As she got closer, she could see that they were loosely gathered beside a flooded river.

The ginger she-cat stood up to greet her, pricking her ears sharply. "Rosepaw only has two wounds- the deep one on her shoulder and a bruised paw. But Lightshine was the cat to fight Brightstar, who obviously had an advantage with his gift." Squirrelstrike reported. "Glowheart wasn't that injured, and she got him caught in some brambles. Her brother, however..." she turned her gaze to the courageous tom, whose thick white pelt was matted with blood.

"Did you... Did you defeat Brightstar?" the ginger warrior asked timidly, casting a considerate glance at her son.

"The prophecy was about actual brambles and hail. He tripped over the vines caught on his paws, and when he fell a chunk of ice hit him on the head." Twistertail panted, still winded from the run downhill.

"Oh. Was it quick?" Squirrelstrike said painfully.

"Yes, yes. He didn't even know what hit him. What happened to his evil tench-cats?" the young warrior asked oddly, trying to change the subject.

"I finished off Snakelash, but Ratchaser and Viperstrike are still out there somewhere, and I think Crowpelt got away, too. But none of us are too badly injured, except for Lightshine and Rosepaw. I hope Glowheart will be back soon with those... Things. Whatever Sagepool called them."

"Where is Glowheart now?"

"She's collecting some herbs for Sagepool and Mosscurl. Apparently CliffClan cats forage by this river-"

"Onyx-eye!" Twistertail suddenly remembered, her head shooting up. "She's badly hurt, and I left her all alone!" she whirled around to where the top of the mountain would be if she could see it through the rain, but by some outrageous miracle, a familiar black cat was already stumbling towards her.

"Sister?" the young warrior narrowed her eyes. Even though it was much more likely that she had died and was appearing as a dark spirit, Onyx-eye was slowly climbing over the rocks. "Is that another CliffClan thing?" Twistertail asked, stunned. "Coming back from the dead?"

"Yes, CliffClan cats have been known to survive falling on rocks." Sagepool offered, not looking up from where he was patching up a cut on Lightshine's back. "But she may not live much longer if she bleeds to death out here."

The scrawny cat blindly stumbled closer. Now that Twistertail could see her more clearly, she noticed that one of her eyes was unfocused and her breathing was ragged. Onyx-eye flopped down next to Lightshine, obliviously mumbling praises to the sleeping warrior. Sagepool rushed over, using a claw to peel back one of her eyelids. The healer glanced over his shoulder at Duskpaw, waving his tail at the apprentice. "Here, Duskpaw." he called. "This is what brain damage looks like."

"Is she going to be alright?" Twistertail demanded, her fur bristling. Just when her heart had stopped pounding and the fog in her head had cleared, she felt another spike of nervous energy. But before she could say anything to her sister, Glowheart returned with a bundle of herbs. The soft-furred she-cat took one look at Onyx-eye and rushed over, her eyes widening with concern.

"Smokesight told us about this, didn't he? Is she going to be blind in one eye for the rest of her life?" she fretted. The cream-colored tom shooed her back with a paw, hissing on behalf of his patient.

"Go give those herbs to Mosscurl. And you two help us move these three under that tree. Then, you can step back until we say you can suffocate them." he spat. Glowheart nodded and dropped the bundle by the junior healer, who gratefully rolled them open and began to apply them to Rosepaw's concerning shoulder wound.

Twistertail and Squirrelstrike worked together to drag Lightshine under a willow tree that offered protection from the rain, while Glowheart easily lifted Onyx-eye by the scruff. Soon Sagepool followed with Rosepaw as Mosscurl set down the bundle of herbs between two roots. She immediately clawed apart the green-and-red leaves and dug out the contents, narrowing her eyes. "Glowheart, this is all you got? Did you even look for half of the herbs I told you to get?" she growled.

"Sorry, you guys. I just didn't want to go far from Lightshine and Rosepaw." the white she-cat dipped her head humbly.

"Well then, you three can make yourselves useful by collecting some herbs for us." Sagepool ordered without looking up from where he was still hovering over Onyx-eye.

"I think I should stay here in case Viperstrike and Ratchaser come back. And for Duskpaw, too." Squirrelstrike suggested.

"Alright, you." Sagepool grumbled. "Go outside and try not to freeze. You two can take this and search for a few herbs." he used his tail to push a flower towards them. It was dark blue, with indigo spots.

Twistertail edged closer, sniffing at it. "Is it a traveling herb?" she asked.

"No, it's a painkiller. From what I know, Snakelash gave you some considerable bites on your underside and Glowheart didn't fight Brightstar and go uninjured. Now, if you go upstream and find a muddy hollow, there's moss growing on the darkest trees. And get more of the flower you just saw, plus a white-and-yellow flower and purple berries from a bush with green-and-red leaves." he instructed.

"Moss, that blue flower, white-and-yellow flower, and purple berries from a bush with green-and-red leaves." Glowheart recited dutifully, licking the sour taste from her muzzle. She nodded at Twistertail before dutifully trotting back into the rain, seemingly with a new burst of energy.

"I don't see how you CliffClan cats do that!" the young warrior marveled.

"Do what?" Glowheart asked innocently.

"Not only did you remember all the things Sagepool said, you and Lightshine and Onyx-eye escaped from that battle with a lot less wounds than you should have!" she pointed out. "And now you don't even look tired, too."

"Well..." the soft-furred cat glanced around, taking in the landscape. Even though it must have been sun-high, the rain made it feel like dusk. The river was wider than the two streams that fed into the lake in the valley, but on the other side all that could be seen was the sandy shore. Finally, Glowheart sighed heavily. "I don't think any cat in CliffClan will like what I'm about to say." she admitted.

"Oh, what's that?" Twistertail asked, trying to make space in her crowded brain for the information she was about to receive.

"You know how we honor our healers and have a very close connection with all spirits? Like how Onyx-eye literally betrayed her own sister because that's what she thought the prophecy was about? We take the supernatural very seriously. As you may have noticed, Onyx-eye is the cat most often assigned to guard the Moonpond."

"Guard it from what?" the black-and-white she-cat demanded.

"Those are the berries I got last time!" Glowheart suddenly took off across the shore. She stopped in front of a wall of rock, where two green-and-red bushes with dark purple berries were growing. She bit off a few clusters and wrapped them in the spotted leaves and set them down on the icy sand before wordlessly gliding further ahead through the rain, which had softened considerably.

Twistertail struggled forwards to pick up the ball of leaves, her recent predicaments once again clouding her head. She hadn't slept in ages, and usually she would have eaten something by now. The young cat had traveled from ForestClan all the way to the river at the base of the mountain where the StoneClans lived. On top of that, she had just survived what was easily the most intense battle she had ever seen.

Glowheart returned swiftly, carrying two types of flowers bound together in moss. She nudged the other warrior roughly, and Twistertail shook her head vigorously in an attempt to drive her sluggishness away. The two cats turned back to follow the flow of the river, with Twistertail falling further and further behind with each stride. By the time Glowheart had started the hike back up the hill, it was a tedious effort just to keep her eyes open. There was no way these cats could expect her to withstand this amount of pressure. All she wanted to do was fall asleep. All she wanted to do was fall...

"All cats of ForestClan, please gather for a Clan meeting!" Parsleystar yowled from the leader's perch. Twistertail sprang to her paws from where she had been sunning herself in the late-greenleaf sun, eagerly pricking her ears towards the string of gathered cats waiting at the front of the crowd. Rosepaw and her siblings had been training for seven moons now, and all had passed their warriors' assessments with flying colors. Now, there was only one thing left to do.

The black-and-white she-cat took her spot among her three closest friends- Mousefall, Finchflame, and Pumpkinpelt. She gave her apprentice an encouraging smile as the small tabby rushed past the older members of the Clan. Finally, Lilyspring took her place on the deputy's boulder, and Parsleystar turned her attention to the three apprentices who were practically quivering in excitement.

"I have watched these three cats as they trained for their lives as warriors. Now, it is time for them to receive their warrior names. Thrushpaw, from now on you will be known as Thrushfall, named after your resemblance to your mentor, along with your loyalty and dedication. Berrypaw, from now on you will be known as Berryburn, named after your energy and fiery personality."

Mousefall let out a wild howl in congratulations for his apprentice, and Twistertail joined in out of admiration for the pair. Thrushfall and Berryburn took in the cheering with pride, their tails pointed straight towards the sky. Finally, Parsleystar turned her attention to their sister.

"Rosepaw, from now on you will be known as Roseroar, named after your resemblance to a lion." she declared. Out of all the Clan, Twistertail, Finchflame, and Sparrowspots were the three cats to yowl the loudest as Roseroar grinned widely at her audience. After a few moments, Parsleystar trained her eyes on the oldest warrior. "Along with three of our apprentices becoming warriors, Robinsong wishes to retire. May she enjoy many moons of rest." the leader announced. "Aside from apprentices becoming warriors, we also have kits becoming apprentices. Russetkit, Carminekit, Scarletkit, please step forwards."

Sparrowspots had done a fine job of grooming his kits for their major event, but all three possessed Pumpkinpelt's bushy ginger fur, which was impossible to smooth down. Like their mother, bits of twigs and leaves always stuck to them, but most of the Clan didn't mind.

"You three have reached the age of which I must guide you into your roles in the Clan. Russetkit, from now on you will be known as Russetpaw. Your mentor will be Finchflame. Carminekit, from now on you will be known as Carminepaw. Your mentor will be Ambereyes. And Scarletkit, from now on you will be known as Scarletpaw. I will be your mentor." Parsleystar ordered.

A long applause followed, and by the end several cats were standing up to leave, but Twistertail and Finchflame shared a knowing look. There was more news to share. Parsleystar sat back, observing the cats below. "That's not all, you know. We have a new queen as well. Twistertail and Finchflame will be expecting a litter of kits sometime in the early leaf-fall. This is all the news I have to offer. You are free to leave." the leader said elegantly.

As the gathered cats began to dissolve, Twistertail made a beeline for Roseroar, who was excitedly chirping at Berryburn and Thrushfall. The young tabby soon noticed her former mentor out of

the corner of her eye, and turned to face her. "Hey, Twistertail! You like my new name? And I didn't know you and Finchflame were having kits!" she said brightly.

Twistertail felt herself grinning wider by the moment. "I think that's a lovely name, Roseroar. It fits you perfectly. And of course Finchflame and I are having kits. We've been together for moons now!" she purred.

"But why him? I thought Mousefall had a giant crush on you since you were apprentices." the new warrior pointed out.

"Oh... Let's just say our fates are already written in the stars..." Twistertail said ceremoniously. Her former apprentice rolled her eyes, sensing her theatrics.

"Alright, I'll leave you to it. Now that I'm a warrior, I need to pick out a nest!" she smiled mischievously before quickly darting off to the den, where her brother Thrushfall was already dragging together pieces of moss. Twistertail turned around to reclaim her spot on the smooth rocks, but a familiar cream-and-ginger tom was standing behind her.

"You should probably be throwing together your new nest, too." Finchflame suggested cheerfully. "We waited until the last moment to tell the Clan. Those kits will be here soon!"

The new queen glanced around the now-peaceful camp, feeling an unusual stab of sadness. "I know, it's just... There was this one time when Robinsong was yelling at me, and her words really stuck. She was calling me out for not doing enough for my Clan, and I promised I would change. What if I didn't train Roseroar for a serious battle? Can she swim fast enough? Is she-"

"Twistertail, you did great. If you didn't care deeply about your apprentice, you wouldn't be worrying about whether or not you've done enough for her." Finchflame assured. He edged closer to touch whiskers with his mate. "Your going to be a great mother, you know."

The black-and-white she-cat sighed softly, gazing up at the sky.

"Yes, I know. I'm going to be a great mother. Let's just say it's already written in the stars..."

Chapter Forty

Four of the ForestClan warriors had been chatting excitedly for what seemed like an eternity until the GroveClan and ConiferClan cats arrived on the island. Twistertail immediately leaped to her paws, searching the new crowd for familiar faces. Sure enough, Lemmingleap and Orioleflight came trotting over, brushing their tails on every other step.

"You guys, we have excellent news!" Orioleflight practically squealed. "My apprentice became a warrior the other day!"

"No way, Roseroar and Thrushfall did, too!" Twistertail purred. "You must have trained hard, Orioleflight. Wasn't he your apprentice for, like, three moons?"

"Of course he passed his assessment beautifully." Lemmingleap said softly, smiling proudly at her mate. "She's got to be one of the best mentors in the Clan."

"Wait 'till you hear the news in ForestClan!" Pumpkinpelt boasted. "Me and Sparrowspots' kits became apprentices! And Twistertail is a queen now!"

Orioleflight chirped in approval, while Lemmingleap glanced around at the ForestClan warriors. "That's great new, Pumpkinpelt. And is Finchflame the father?" she asked simply.

"Of course. Who else?" the cream-and-ginger tom said cheerfully.

Lemmingleap cast an unreadable glance behind them at the pale tabby tom who hadn't said anything to the other warriors. "I thought you and Mousefall were mates." she recounted. But before Twistertail could comment on the situation, the DeltaClan cats arrived. She pricked her ears at Gillflip, who broke away from their patrol to join the relatively younger warriors under their tree.

"Hello, all." Gillflip said in his smooth voice. "I'm glad to see my

friends strong and healthy before the cold season sets in."

"You sound like you're a hundred moons old, Gillflip!" Pumpkinpelt wrinkled her nose. "I don't remember you talking like that four moons ago. What's up with that?"

Gillflip smiled slightly, as if to break his act. "Sorry, all. I'm using my training voice."

"Training voice?" Finchflame prodded. "Why do you need a training voice?"

"Me and Finflutter each have apprentices now." the pale gray tom explained. "I use this voice whenever giving important information."

Orioleflight opened her mouth to give her opinion, but in that moment, Sedgestar let out a loud grumble. "Alright, everyone. Settle down. This gathering has begun." he ordered. As the cats began to take their places, Twistertail inched closer to Gillflip, who was one of her closest friends from outside of ForestClan. Beside her, Finchflame shuffled closer to his mate, mischief gleaming in his eyes.

"Can you believe that guy's still alive?" he snickered. "He was old when Pigeonwhisker was an apprentice!"

"Hush, you." Lemmingleap scolded quietly from his other side. "I was talking with a MireClan patrol this morning, and they said he was retiring sometime soon. Don't make fun of a cat because they've served their Clan for moons beyond your lifetime." The young warriors nodded at her wise words before turning back to the bench, where eight leaders were waiting.

Eight? Twistertail narrowed her eyes at Quartzstar. CliffClan hadn't showed up to a gathering since Brightstar's defeat! She glanced around desperately to locate a familiar cat, and finally her eyes found Glowheart, who was sitting on the edge of the foliage and beckoning with her fluffy tail.

The black-and-white warrior looked around for a moment. What did the legendary CliffClan cat want with her? Not wanting to draw

attention, she slunk off towards the edge of the island while everyone was still focused on Sedgestar's report. Glowheart had disappeared into the leaves, and now was standing on the shore. Even in the middle of the night, her fur seemed to glow. Maybe that was how she got her name.

"What is it?" Twistertail asked timidly.

"There are some cats who'd like to see you." Glowheart informed her. The younger cat obediently searched the shore for a moment, then picked out a familiar black pelt in the shadows. Behind her, a somewhat recognizable gray tom was resting in the sand.

"Onyx-eye?" she wondered. "What are you doing here? And CliffClan doesn't come to a gathering unless it's something important!"

"We have some news that shouldn't be shared with *all* cats around the lake. Some good, some bad." her sister said simply. "First of all, I'll be blind in one eye for the rest of my life. But you probably knew that. And second of all, me and Breezerunner are having kits. Third order of business, we've spotted your mentor on the edge of our territory. I think he was looking for that ear I bit off the last time I saw him!"

"This is... a lot of information." Twistertail said, trying to piece it all together. The gray tom must be her mate. She vaguely remembered her visit to CliffClan, where one of the apprentices was called Breezepaw. One was Pebblepaw, and another was Talonpaw. And the other one? Was there even another?

"So Crowpelt has been spotted near CliffClan, and you're having kits." she declared. "Alright, but what was the information only I should hear?"

"Well..." Glowheart broke in. "That's the bad news. Magpiepelt has received some strange visions. And she's behaving exactly how Shadowsweep did when she was younger, and *her* visions eventually killed her. This kind of thing runs in your family, right? Wasn't it the healer Flickerfur who first had it?"

Twistertail blinked rapidly, stunned. "It can't be." she finally managed. "You mean... Magpiepelt's going to... End up like Shadowsweep?"

Onyx-eye shifted closer, offering a comforting smile that looked as if she was ferociously wielding her freakishly long teeth. "Of course not! But even if she does, just in case..." she paused, seemingly for a dramatic effect. "At least she'll be remembered as the cat who delivered our prophecy."

The black-and-white cat pulled her head back, narrowing her eyes. "What do you mean, our prophecy? That was Shadowsweep."

"No, not that." Glowheart said heavily. "There's a new one."

Twistertail looked desperately to her sister, whose dark green eyes were glittering in the light of the full moon. The black cat shuffled her paws intensely, as if to prepare for a long speech. But instead, it was rather short.

"Stone will be shattered by poison, and the sky will shatter the spirits."

Final Allegiances

My apologies if these are incomplete!

ForestClan:

Leader: Parsleystar

Apprentice: Scarletpaw

Deputy: Lilyspring

Healers:

Sagepool

Apprentice: Chamomilepaw

Mosscurl

Apprentice: Duskpaw

Warriors:

Squirrelstrike

Apprentice: Cilantropaw

Mousefall

Apprentice: Oreganopaw

Pumpkinpelt

Twistertail

Finchflame

Apprentice: Russetpaw

Ambereyes

Apprentice: Carminepaw

Thrushfall

Berryburn

Roseroar

Sparkspirit

Apprentices:

Chamomilepaw

Cilantropaw

Oreganopaw

Russetpaw

Carminepaw

Scarletpaw

Queens:

Cardinalheart

Sparrowspots

Elders:

Robinsong

Epilogue

"Hello? Viperstrike? Ratchaser?" the one-eyed tabby called. "Are you out here?"

A familiar voice answered through the dusk. "Twistedbramble? Is that you?"

"Ratchaser?" the she-cat put on a sudden burst of speed, racing across the rocky field. She had crossed a mountain and a river, but she had finally found her mate. The grayish-brown tom was standing on a boulder, surveying the scenery. He immediately jumped down and rushed forwards towards the tabby.

"Twistedbramble, you found us!" he cheered. "That took you long enough!" The two cats slowed down to touch whiskers, with Ratchaser purring happily. "Sorry about Squirrelstrike killing Snakelash, though. But at least me and Crowpelt and Purslanepaw and Viperstrike are still here. You are going to join us, right?"

The she-cat suddenly drew back her head, alarmed. "Join you? Aren't you coming back to ForestClan with our kits?"

"But... Viperstrike..." Ratchaser trailed off, sensing the tense moment. "We're planning our revenge, Twistedbramble. Don't you want to get back at the cats who hurt you?"

"Those are my Clan, you know." she flared defensively. "You can't just leave them like that! I'm done following you guys and your evil intentions. Thanks to Darkstar and Brightstar, Mintleaf is dead. Marmotpaw is dead. Snakelash is dead. I had my eye clawed out! I'm going home to care for my family, Ratchaser. Have fun with your stupid friends."

The tom glanced at the rocks behind him. "Actually, we are a Clan." he said oddly.

"What?" Twistedbramble hissed. "What do you mean?"

"It's a long way back to ForestClan. Why don't you stay the night and meet the newest additions to CloudClan?" Ratchaser suggested, circling around and nearly vanishing into the darkness before the tabby reluctantly followed.

"What's CloudClan?" she asked suspiciously, pacing to keep u with his long strides.

"These cats are the lost StoneClan that CliffClan chased off moons ago. They used to live on the ridge of this mountain and hunt small rodents. Some say it's IceClan or MistClan, but they refer to themselves as CloudClan. Anyways, they recently have decided to join the Valley Cats again, and right now we're working on new names. Our camp is right... Here!" he waved his tail at a rocky hollow, where several strange cats were gathered.

"How can you be sure they're the descendants of the lost StoneClan?" Twistedbramble pointed out. She didn't trust these strange cats. "For all you know, they could be some random band of rogues!"

"Shh, Don't let Sapphirestar hear you say that!" Ratchaser hissed. As he spoke, a blue-gray she-cat materialized out of the night. Her icy eyes seemed to give off an eerie blue light. Behind her, Crowpelt and a gray-and-white cat appeared. "Greetings, my liege!" the grayish-brown tom said humbly. "This is Twistedbramble, my mate. I'm sure you've heard of her."

"Hello, stranger." the blue-gray cat said smoothly. "I'm Sapphire... Star. Yes, Sapphirestar. I know who you are. Your mate hasn't stopped talking about you since he found us. You already know Crowpelt, I assume. And this is Sniffles- I mean, Coldsong, our... Healer. Senior healer. Is that right?" she cast an uncertain glance at Ratchaser, who nodded encouragingly.

"Come over here, you two!" she suddenly snapped at a large tom and a black she-cat who had been licking the bones of some bird. The tom obediently trotted over to Twistedbramble, grinning at her welcomingly.

"Hello, there!" he said warmly. "I'm Thunder... Splash?"

"Thundersplash?" Twistedbramble narrowed her eyes. "What a strange name."

The tom looked ruffled for a moment. "No, not that. This is Splash, my sister. She remembers my name even if I forget it all the time." he explained.

The black she-cat was barely visible against the shadows, but it was clear that she was rolling her eyes. "It's Thunderheart. And I'm Splashshine now, remember?" she spat. Her brother nodded, mumbling the names under his breath as if he were hearing them for the first time.

"Ah, yes. How lovely." Twistedbramble managed, forcing a small smile.

"So, what do you think? Are you going to stay and help us rebuild CloudClan?" Ratchaser asked hopefully.

Twistedbramble shook her head, uncertain. "I don't know. This is a lot to take in, especially after the long day I had... Do I have to decide now? I think I'm just going to be spending the night."

"That's alright." Ratchaser said gently. "It's a big decision. I'm sure no one will judge you, whichever path you choose."

"Really?" Twistedbramble cringed at the desperation in her voice.

"I promise." the tom said strongly. "Whatever you decide, no one will blame you."

Stay tuned for Valley Cats Book Two: Poison Clouds!

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